

CAROLINE B. COONEY

Night School



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Caroline B. Cooney



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Prologue

THERE WAS A STRANGE moment before the engine turned over, as if something were laying on the car's motor. Julie felt faintly uneasy. Her headlights didn't penetrate the night the way they should have. And the dashboard no longer lit the interior the way it usually did; the inside of the car was blacker.

She had forgotten to check the backseat before she got in. With a sickening lurch, Julie knew that somebody was in the car with her. Julie whirled, and saw nothing, but it was too dark to be sure, a darkness thick as black pillows. She reached for the overhead light, to turn it on, but nothing happened. She put her hand between the two front seats to pat the leather backseat, and reassure herself that nothing was there.

Something was there.

Her hand was taken by another hand and squeezed. The hand was sweaty and thick.

Julie screamed and yanked the car to a stop, leaping out in the middle of traffic. But when she stood panting on the yellow dividing lines of the pavement, and stared into her own car, fully illuminated by street lamps, it was empty.

How could she have frightened herself so badly? Julie didn't even get hysterical when circumstances made hysteria reasonable.

She got back in the car, waving apologies to furious drivers on all sides, trying to smile, feeling like a jerk. Her knees were jelly and her foot could hardly find the accelerator.

She drove slowly, but her pulse went faster and faster. Traffic vanished. Streets were empty. She turned the radio louder and louder. She

could get nothing but static, as if broadcasting had ceased; as if some huge catastrophe had struck California and missed only Julie.

The drive home seemed endless and unknown, as if she were driving in a foreign country. She was gripping the wheel so tightly she got cramps in her fingers and finally took her right hand off the wheel to shake it up and down and loosen the joints.

Outside the passenger window, people were looking in at her.

Their faces were like moons, blue and shivery.

No features, just skin.

The faces were pressed right up against the glass. They were laughing, and pointing at her, and getting ready.

Chapter 1

MARIAH FREDERICK'S LIFE WAS constructed around two secrets. If she had ever talked about her secrets, they would have sounded ordinary—minor stuff everybody suffered now and then. But Mariah's secrets were not ordinary. They were addictions.

Mariah had had a crush on Andrew Todd since third grade. Usually, a third-grade girl thinks of boys as rarely as possible. But Mariah adored the eight-year-old Andrew, and as the years passed, her adoration never wore away. It deepened and widened, and eventually, it consumed her.

In real life, Andrew might say “Hi there,” once a week. Andrew didn't even use her name, which hurt, because Mariah loved her name.

But in Mariah's imagination, she and Andrew had lengthy conversations about everything. When she went clothes shopping (with her girlfriends), she would silently ask Andrew's opinion on her purchase. (Andrew thought she had wonderful taste.) In the privacy of her secret crush, Mariah would go for long drives with Andrew, although in fact, she was the only one in the car. (Andrew thought she was a very skilled driver.)

She and Andrew had a long history together, and often laughed with each other about previous adventures, or blushed over early mistakes. None of which, of course, existed—any more than the laughter or the sharing really existed.

Mariah had snacks with Andrew in front of the television, and once her mother actually caught her fixing a sandwich for Andrew—the way he liked it, and not the way anybody in the Frederick family did. (Mariah was alone at the time.)

An invisible Andrew loved playing computer games with her and although they'd never been on a court together, he was her best tennis partner. Sometimes, when Mariah was with her best friend Sal, she actually started to tell Sal what Andrew had said to her yesterday ... forgetting, since it felt so real, that she had made it all up.

It went way beyond what anybody could call an active imagination. It was another world. Her own private soap opera that required new scripts every day.

Every day she told herself to stop it, it was getting out of hand, she had to get a grip on herself—and every day, she enjoyed her secret crush too much to quit.

Andrew never suspected. Nor did Andrew develop a crush on Mariah. In fact, Andrew hardly noticed Mariah. He passed through elementary school and junior high without changing much. He stayed adorable and got taller, stayed smart and got more athletic.

But Mariah's crush got larger and larger. Her crush was like a member of the family; it was there; it had always been there; she had learned to make the compromises it required.

She certainly understood that Andrew would be shocked if he knew the part he played in the life of a girl he barely thought about.

But stopping the crush would have been like stopping any addiction: very difficult. And completely undesirable. In her dream, Mariah had managed to have a wonderful, rewarding social life. If she gave up the Andrew of her dreams, she'd have no social life at all.

As long as nobody knew and it didn't hurt anybody, Mariah reasoned, what difference did the crush make? It wouldn't destroy her body, like drugs. It wouldn't turn her into a criminal. It wouldn't upset her parents—

well, yes, it would upset her parents. But they would never know, because she was so good at keeping the crush on the inside.

Even Sal, her best friend, didn't realize that Mariah had an inner life; a complete world, really; with Andrew.

Sal certainly, did not know that Mariah had a *second* secret life. Because when Mariah wasn't invisibly and silently with Andrew, she wasn't hanging out with Sal, either. She was with the famous Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle.

Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle were a clique that had begun in fifth grade with Julie and Brooke. In fifth grade they were just two girls playing with Barbies, sharing sandwiches, and sleeping over. Autumn moved to town in sixth grade and became a very tight third member, while Danielle arrived in seventh grade.

It was a source of pain to Mariah that Julie-Brooke had not chosen her, but waited for Autumn; and that Julie-Brooke-Autumn had not chosen Mariah, either, but waited for Danielle.

Sometimes Mariah stared into her mirror, wondering why she didn't look right for Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle. (Andrew, of course, thought she looked perfect, and that even changing a molecule would be a disaster. He kissed her cheek and his invisible lips comforted her as they always did.)

Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle were greatly to be envied, for they always had laughing company. Their phones always rang and their cars were always full. Each was very pretty, in her own way. Depending on her mood, Mariah would find herself admiring one girl more than the rest. Sometimes she didn't pretend to be a fifth member of Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle, but pretended actually to be one of them. Usually Autumn.

When she was also pretending that Andrew was in love with her and walking beside her, her interior life could become quite complex. At these times speech was difficult for fear of using the wrong script and being found out.

How Mariah envied Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle.

Her buddy Sal did not. Sal was annoying because she didn't envy anybody. She liked being plain old Sal.

"But you don't date!" Mariah would say. "You don't have tons of friends and you don't go to parties."

Sal would shrug. "Oh, well. Someday that will come or else someday it won't."

How could Sal be so casual? What if the second part were the true part? *What if boyfriends never came?*

"Meantime," Sal would beam at Mariah, "I'm having a great life." If there was one thing Sal had, it was a beautiful smile. "I have a best friend," Sal would say, her eyes reflecting Mariah. (Although to Mariah's eyes, their friendship was mild and infrequent compared to Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle.) "I get good grades, I have a walk-on in the musical, I made swim team, and my parents think I'm perfect. What else is there?"

But oh! for Mariah, there was so much else.

And all of it ... pretend.

Once or twice a week, Sal and Mariah went horseback riding. For whatever reason, the crush on Andrew didn't go along when Mariah was riding. On horseback, Mariah was free of him, and it was as wonderful as being free of any other addiction—cigarettes, or drugs, or bulimia.

That was when Mariah saw the extent to which her crush had taken over her thoughts. Inside her mind, she was carrying on long intense dialogues *that would never be spoken*, to a boy *who would never be*

listening. How sad. How pitiful. There was the rest of the world, actually living and taking risks—and here she was, faking literally every moment of her life.

If she actually told anybody and they actually believed her, she would end up in therapy forever and ever.

It was on a Wednesday that Mariah Frederick happened to go down the main hall of the high school and find Andrew Todd standing alone.

Oh! he was perfect. He was perfectly photogenic, perfectly nice, perfectly smart, perfectly athletic, perfectly perfect. Mariah's heart quickened. She felt thick and stupid just looking at him. For all the years of practice dialogue, she could think of nothing to say. In her secrets, she knew everything about Andrew—every detail of his existence—but in real life, she knew very little.

Andrew was in front of the bulletin board by the library. Reading the board was a good excuse to stand next to Andrew. So she walked up, and he of course turned and smiled. “Hi, Mariah,” he said, in his friendly, meaningless way.

“Hi, Andrew.” Her heart surged like the kind of dangerous tide caused by volcanic eruptions. “Anything interesting?”

Andrew Todd pointed to a single piece of paper, carefully centered on the huge bulletin board, as if somebody had gone to the trouble of measuring right down to the quarter inch. The announcement was in black. Icicle-hung printing from some strange computer font crept and dripped down the page. It was an eerie, creepy announcement, and seemed to Mariah's eyes to glow with fingerprints, evil crusted whorls of dark plans and sick thoughts.

NIGHT CLASS

“Night Class,” said Andrew, and it seemed to Mariah that his voice turned to Night also, that his voice grew dark and shadowy, like the letters on the board.

But Mariah had made up so much about Andrew she could no longer tell when she was making things up. “Night Class?” she repeated. Can’t I say something intelligent? her heart cried. Can’t I be the interesting, intriguing sexy person he loves when I make him up?

She forced herself into reality. Every year this got a little harder, and every year she got a little more afraid of being stuck in her unreality, and never getting out.

Okay: Night Class: Okay, that meant subjects and study.

Mariah had her hands full this year. Chemistry, algebra, English literature, second-year Spanish, and geography. She was good at anything to do with numbers, so chem and algebra, though difficult and time-consuming, pleased her. But she was not fond of lengthy reading and she detested all writing, which meant English lit, Spanish, and geography were exhausting. The last thing Mariah Frederick needed was to go to night school.

It was a sign-up sheet. Nobody had signed up. The more she stared at the fingerprints, the less real they seemed, like Andrew. Perhaps they weren’t even there. Like Andrew. “It doesn’t actually say what the class is, Andrew,” Mariah pointed out. She loved using his name for real instead of silently inside her thoughts. Andrew. So beautiful. What would he do right now if she told him her entire world consisted of him? Quickly she moved into real speech, guarding the syllables, to keep herself from exposing the secret. “It could be anything, Andrew. Computer Repair for Dummies or Opera Appreciation for Senior Citizens.”

Andrew laughed. “Water Color for the Non-artistic,” he agreed. “Russian Affairs for Political Junkies.”

“French for Restaurant Ordering,” said Mariah.

“The History of Fast Food,” said Andrew, grinning.

She was entertaining him! They were giggling together, the way she had always planned.

“It meets Wednesdays,” said Andrew. “That’s tonight. I’m going.” He wrote his name on the first line. ANDREW TODD. Fat awkward printing, as if he were still in kindergarten. Why hadn’t his handwriting caught up to his body? It gave Mariah a funny feeling, as if there were something wrong with Andrew Todd.

He’s going, she thought. There is actually a real-life chance of spending real-life hours with Andrew. If I sign up, will he know that he’s the only reason I would ever take a night class? But maybe he should know. Maybe I shouldn’t have a secret crush. Maybe my crush should be right out in the open, where he can take hold of it. Take hold of me. Love me forever the way I love him.

Boldly, Mariah signed her name on line two.

Andrew smiled very slightly. For a horrible sick moment she saw the fingerprints on his cheek as well as on the poster: glowing twisted marks, like scars of evil. “Tonight, then, Mariah,” said Andrew softly. He walked off as if he owned both the hall and the time, long athletic legs swinging, wide shoulders motionless above them.

She looked back at the sign-up sheet. It smiled at her, the dripping black letters turning into teeth.

She had a sense of falling off the edge of something, and she thought: It’s my own sanity. I have to climb out of my daydream world; I have to do all real things with real people in real places. Night Class is good. Who

cares what it's really about? I'll assign myself a subject: giving up the secret worlds. Getting real.

She thought of the real parts. Sitting next to Andrew. Sharing assignments. After class, getting ice cream. Or pizza. Surely this weekend, he'd want to go down to the boardwalk on the beach and walk for miles, while he held Mariah's hand. The Pacific Ocean would be on one side and the mountains on the other, and over them both, the blue sky and the beginning of love.

There was nothing wrong with her dream crush. It had been preparation, that's all. Practice, the way you practiced riding until you could win trophies. Mariah slid easily into her dream crush, filled by an Andrew who worshiped her.

"What on earth are you doing, Mariah? Signing up for a night class? What are you—nuts?"

Mariah jumped badly. She looked quickly at the sign-up sheet before she looked at the speaker, needing to see if it still had the fingerprints and the smile.

It had nothing. Not even dripping letters. It was just typing, and just words.

How much am I making up now? she thought, chilled. I've gone past making up conversations? Now I'm making up poster graphics? "Hi, Tommy," she said, with the ease of one whose voice does the right thing even when the mind is lost in secret spaces.

Tommy was a nice person. Technically, Tommy'd known Mariah for years. Because so much of Mariah was a secret, though, he hardly knew her at all. If I died today, she thought, what could I claim I've really done in the world? I've dreamed. That's all.

“It doesn’t even say what the class is!” Tommy was gently laughing at Mariah. “Just what are you and Andrew intending to do there?”

Mariah blushed.

This time, Tommy’s smile was once removed, like a rarely encountered cousin. Tommy was thinking of other things, other girls, other plans. He moved on down the hall as Andrew had before him, in possession of the space and the time, happy in his world, whatever that was.

And my world, thought Mariah, dizzyingly seeing more fingerprints, more black letters, hanging in the air like spectres from other worlds, what on earth is my world?

Or was her world on earth?

Autumn Ivers was sick of Julie-Brooke-Danielle.

Here it was the middle of the school year, and Autumn could not think of a thing she had done except hang out with Julie-Brooke-Danielle. Everybody else changed friends with each event. They had their sports friends and their music friends, their skating friends and their drama club friends, their computer game friends and their drive-in-the-country friends.

Whereas she, Autumn, was chained to Julie-Brooke-Danielle.

Autumn considered leaving the group. But then, with whom would she experiment when they got new makeup or changed their hair? With whom would she explore the new shops? With whom would she sit in the cafeteria? Giggle on the phone?

If she gave up Julie-Brooke-Danielle, how would she find other friends? Had she been nice enough to other girls that they would even want to be friends with her?

Sometimes you saw girls who were often alone, like Sal. Sal looked fine out there all by herself. She looked easy and content, as if this were her master plan. But Autumn couldn't imagine sitting or walking or shopping alone. She was always a little relieved when Mariah raced over and found Sal and then there were two of them. Autumn hated seeing people on their own.

Mariah was one of the more interesting people Autumn knew. Caught up in some other world, as if inside her head, she was writing screenplays or inventing new computers. Mariah was pretty in a soft way; a gentle way; whereas Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle were good-looking in strong ways, with bold clothes and defined hair, elegant features and crowd-crossing voices.

Autumn observed the procession of kids up to and away from the bulletin board. It began with Andrew, on whom Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle had all had crushes at one time or another. Andrew was the best. He seemed to have been peeled out of a television soap opera; he had the distinctive quality of stardom, and he knew it, and his every move was photogenic. It was comic, the way he would turn this way and that, as if he thought even algebra was a photo opportunity or that casting directors sat in on English quizzes.

Andrew and Mariah signed their names on something. Tommy did not. Autumn was intrigued. When she reached the bulletin board, they had moved on, but the sheet betrayed them. They were taking a Night Class.

I could do that, thought Autumn. Suppose I put my name on this list. But suppose Julie-Brooke-Danielle come by, and read it, and see that I've done something without permission.

Permission? Autumn had never thought of her group that way before—a little cult whose permission was required. Immediately Autumn was

furious with herself and with Julie-Brooke-Danielle just for existing. I'm an individual! she thought. I have my own life, thank you very much!

She dug around in her purse for a pencil that still had a point, but just as she pressed the lead against the sheet, she panicked. Jeopardize her friendships for some old night class that didn't even describe itself? Should she ... ? What if she ... ? What if Julie-Brooke-Danielle ... ? Messily, Autumn scrawled letters that might be read as A. Ivers, but might also be interpreted as C. Tuems or D. James.

This made Autumn giggle—she giggled well—and she breezed down the hallway, delighted with herself, and the sudden secret of her very own activity.

Ned examined the bulletin board announcement. Very odd. Andrew, Mariah, and Autumn had all signed up for something that was not identified. (Not that you could tell it was Autumn's writing; he knew only because he'd watched her. Who would have thought a fastidious girl like Autumn would have scrap-heap handwriting?)

Ned assumed that everybody else just had more information than he did. This was the case with most of his life—why not night class, too? Ned always seemed to be the one who didn't know the address, the hour, the host, or even the year.

Andrew, Mariah, and Autumn, thought Ned.

Ned was one of those skinny boys to whom nobody ever spoke. When girls were skinny, everybody told them how wonderful they looked and what great wardrobes they had. When girls were *too* skinny, they were instead anorexic or glamorous, depending on how you felt about figures. But when boys were skinny, they were just skinny. Worthless and nonathletic. Funny hair, spotted face, feet that went the wrong way during

a basketball game, so you scored for the opposite team and were despised for the rest of your life.

This was Ned.

Junior high had been a form of hell for Ned, and he believed he had insight about hell: He knew what form payment would take if you misbehaved on earth. You would be in eighth grade for eternity.

By now, a junior in high school, Ned had found parts of himself. Not enough to be a whole person, but enough to have partial friendships and occasional admission to groups. He was continually on the lookout for more pieces of his real personality, sort of like a prospector looking for petroleum. It was out there somewhere, it was just a matter of sinking a well in the right place.

Could Night Class be the right place?

Autumn came in a group, and he had never thought of her as a single person. If he had, he would have been afraid of her, as he was afraid of Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle. They had a sort of ferocity about them, four being infinitely stronger than one, and Ned lowered his eyes whenever he saw them. Not that the Autumns of the world glanced in the direction of the Neds.

Autumn's hair changed constantly, because a Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle hobby was hair. Autumn was blonde at the moment, although Ned also liked her hair when it was black, and the auburn stage was pretty stunning, too.

Mariah, now, had what Ned thought of as a mom-smile. It wasn't sexy, it wasn't glamorous. It was a smile you'd like to come home to. Ned was embarrassed by this thought. But Mariah would never look at Ned, either. Mariah's eyes focused in some different way than anybody else's;

you never once knew what Mariah was looking at, or thinking of. It gave her an aura, not of being lost, but of being unreachable.

Ned thought longingly of Andrew, who was a finished product. Who had entered kindergarten in a completed state, never mind high school, already knowing everything, including the right people.

A small, intimate night class. What better place to make friends, to inch ahead in the terrible world of popularity?

Ned signed up for Night Class.

Andrew passed the bulletin board again that day. Four names there now: his own printing; Mariah's pretty script; a scrawl that could be anything; Ned Wilton's nervous scribble.

Andrew stepped back into a niche between two windows in which he often stood. The walls of the little niche protected him in some way he did not understand, and was ashamed of. He was strong, poised, popular, and sophisticated. Why, then, did he like to step into the shadows, as it were, and watch people instead of being with them? Why did he act as if the kids were unreal, his classmates just a channel he would change if they got boring?

Andrew was afraid he would turn out to be a watcher rather than a player. Not only did that seem sad and not much fun, it sounded wrong. To be part of the human race, shouldn't you join and give and take? What made him want to watch? What made him yearn for shadows and corners and invisibility?

He considered crossing his name off Night Class.

Andrew was forever shouldering some major burden. He couldn't just play football; he had to train the student manager. He couldn't just have a part in the play; he had to sell the most tickets. He couldn't just do a science project; he had to try to win nationwide contests. His shrink said

(Andrew's entire family went to psychiatrists, although nobody was nuts that Andrew could see) it was because he was trying to tame the world.

A class with Ned, Autumn, and Mariah. Andrew had to think about that assortment.

Mariah was always elsewhere. He had been fascinated by her since his fascination with girls began. She was a drifter, rowing with one oar, sailing without a chart, and happy doing it. Andrew had not the slightest clue to Mariah, who seemed at one and the same time to be listening intently to anything Andrew said, and yet caught in thoughts so engrossing she probably didn't even know Andrew's name.

Andrew wanted his name known. He wanted to be famous. He wasn't sure what he would be famous at. He wasn't musical so it wouldn't be as a recording star, and he disliked the stage, because the stage was so much the opposite of shadow and corner. But one day, Andrew knew, fame would be his.

Once a few years ago, Andrew's mother said that the house was overflowing with junk and she wasn't keeping it anymore. She began throwing away artifacts of his childhood—old spelling tests and clay handprints and ancient Halloween costumes.

History would want this stuff! She couldn't deprive the world of his, Andrew's, childhood. Andrew stopped himself from saying this out loud, thank goodness, and then he seized his ego and held it under cold water for a while.

Andrew never told his shrink about his immense ego, because that would give the shrink clues. Stuff to work with. Andrew's goal in analysis was to keep the shrink in the dark.

In the dark.

What would Night Class be? A class of the dark?

Andrew was suddenly, horrifically, engulfed in darkness. The darkness was so complete that he could believe a holocaust had destroyed the sun and the earth and certainly the school. He closed his eyes against it, trying to find sunlight inside himself, but there, too, it was entirely dark. And appealing. He liked the dark. He liked thinking about the dark.

He knew, suddenly, that it was not so much a class that happened to take place at night. It was a class *of the* night. A class for the dark.

An instructor Andrew did not recognize paused in front of the bulletin board. The instructor's back was to Andrew, and there was something invisible about the back itself: It had no gender, no description, no personality.

With a black felt marker, the instructor slashed a fat black zigzag below the four names and wrote two more words. Printing like gashes in flesh filled the bottom of the sheet.

CLASS CLOSED.

Chapter 2

WHEN IT WAS TIME to leave for Night Class, Autumn had no ride.

She was a mile from the school and had certainly never walked that mile. Californians loved exercise: They jogged, they ran, they worked out; they swam, they surfed, they skated ... but they didn't walk to school. Certainly not.

Autumn's entire world was Julie-Brooke-Danielle. She could not imagine calling anybody but them for a ride. Andrew had a car, but she felt awkward calling a boy who had rarely spoken to her, no matter how much Julie-Brooke-Danielle and she had admired him. Autumn was pretty sure Mariah had a car, too. But if some other girl had tried to get a ride with Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle, the quartet would have been incredulous. Julie would have laughed in the girl's face. And being Julie, would have used a cruel nickname to get rid of her.

As for Ned, it was so impossible that somebody of the social standing of Autumn would even remember his existence, let alone climb into his vehicle, that it simply did not enter her mind as a choice.

Autumn stepped out of her house into the night.

It was wonderfully warm: the sort of California winter warm that cuddles and snuggles.

The sky was not black. Distant Los Angeles cast a luminous smudge across the ceiling of the world: the lights of fourteen million people and their streets. Nothing near L.A. could ever really be dark.

Autumn looked down the road in the direction of the high school. The road wound among canyons, had no sidewalks and in many places, no

sides, either. Pavement had been stuck to the canyon side like a poorly wound roll of tape.

A yellow sign was easy to read in the half-dark. FALLING ROCKS, it said. Autumn had a vision of herself as a mere piece off Julie-Brooke-Danielle. A falling rock.

Autumn took a sweater, for the night was cooling off. She felt dangerous and wild. Not only was she about to walk on a narrow twisty road, in the dark, by herself, but Julie-Brooke-Danielle didn't even know.

Autumn was slim and very attractive. She wore her shiny long hair in an extremely neat ponytail, with a clasp at the bottom as well as the top, to prevent the hair from changing position during the day. Her clothes were perfectly matched, and she was among the few in school who had never, not once, dressed for grunge. Autumn always looked as if she could go right into Los Angeles and manage a production company.

She had crossed the lawn as far as the neat sweet rows of lemon trees when the phone rang. She heard it clearly through the open windows of the house she had left. Autumn had only three possible callers: Julie or Brooke or Danielle.

A high school with a thousand kids in it—and she knew for a fact that only three would ever call? The world that had seemed so full and rich inside the house sounded empty out here under the lemon trees.

The answering machine kicked in. From outside, like a visiting wraith, Autumn listened to herself chirrup hello. Julie replied almost harshly, “Autumn! Where are you, anyway? You’re supposed to be home tonight. Call me right away when you get in and tell me where you were.”

Those are *orders*, thought Autumn. I, Autumn Ivers, have spent the last five years of my life obeying orders. I haven't been popular. I've been obedient.

She kept walking, away from the light of the house, and under the huge gnarled oaks. At the edge of the road she paused, as if she were considering skydiving or undersea cave exploration. Then she set off, in the dark, on foot, to travel the lonely mile.

Night Class no longer seemed an oddity for which she had scribbled meaningless shapes instead of signing her name. It seemed very important, a necessity, even, to free herself from the domination of Julie-Brooke-Danielle.

When it was time to leave for night school, Mariah's brother Bevin asked her not to go. "I hate being alone," he mumbled. He didn't look at her. Bevin had a hard time meeting anybody's eyes.

Her brother was one of these desperate isolated people who had no friends. Mariah bled for him, praying he would somehow outgrow it, or that at least it would strengthen him. But neither had happened so far.

It was measurably harder for Bevin to manage school this year, his sophomore year. Mariah, who had loved sophomore year, and for whom junior year was pretty good, too (would be perfect if Andrew should notice her), could not imagine what it felt like to be unwanted in every situation from art to soccer.

This year, it was beyond mere loneliness. Bevin had become a victim. Perhaps he had reached a level of despair that was visible. He had become prey. He was a rabbit and the cruel people in school were jackals. They encircled him, ripping out his courage, and tearing away his abilities.

Bevin didn't even have what rabbits have. He had no protective coloring. He could not run faster than his pursuers. He had no hole in which to hide.

Mariah wanted Mom and Dad to send Bevin to another school, or let him live with relatives in another state, so he could get a fresh start. But

Mom and Dad did not see Bevin the way she did: They saw a quiet, courteous boy who led an interior life.

Mariah was the one with the interior life. Bevin was the one in hell. “He’s quiet because nobody speaks to him!” she screamed once at Dad. “Bevin is courteous because he wouldn’t dare be rude! His interior life consists of desperately wishing he had an exterior life.”

“Nonsense,” said Dad robustly, unable to accept that his only son was not making it.

And Bevin, who had very little left except his father’s opinion of him, would not tell the truth, either. For what if his own father despised him, along with everybody else in the world?

Mom and Dad were sure Bevin would grow up to be a comedian or a screenwriter, because, they insisted, people of great creativity always had quiet childhoods.

But it isn’t quiet, thought Mariah, who had to see her brother in school. It’s torture, and people die of torture.

Everyday, somehow, Bevin managed to get up and go to school. And everyday, somehow, he managed to get home again. He had remarkable courage, his sister thought.

“I’ve signed up for a night class,” she said to Bevin. “It won’t be very long, not the first night. Probably just orientation and getting textbooks and stuff. You’ll be all right here by yourself.”

He didn’t argue with her. Bevin had lost the ability to argue.

At the door she paused, guilty about letting her brother down. As if she were responsible for his failures at school.

But Andrew, as ever, filled her mind. Golden warm thoughts of a splendid golden person seemed brighter even than the setting sun on the

gleaming ocean, and she forgot Bevin, and went joyfully to the car and drove swiftly away.

When it was time to leave for Night School, Ned managed to get permission to drive Mom's Volvo. He would have preferred Dad's Suburban, even though it was so huge and substantial that he felt like a stick figure drawn on the front seat. But Dad was out. Ned had the red at the intersection when Mariah Frederick whipped by.

Ned was in one class with Mariah's brother Bevin. Ned might be on his own a lot, but Bevin had been shoved way beyond solitude. Bevin was the choice of the school bullies, and every school has more than enough bullies to go around. Ned averted his eyes when Bevin came under attack. Ned was enough of a loser; he couldn't attach himself to a real, bottom-level loser like Bevin. What if he and Bevin got grouped together in people's minds, the way Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle were grouped?

Ned rather thought that Bevin would kill himself one day. What choice did he have? He had worse than no life.

Ned wrenched his mind off the painful condition of Mariah's brother, turned once he had the green, and followed the bright red rear lights of her car. He wondered if she knew her brother's life at all, and if she cared, and if she tried to help him.

But Bevin was beyond help.

Any little thing would tip him over the edge, and he would fall, probably not even bothering to scream. People only screamed if they thought somebody would help.

When it was time to leave for Night School, Andrew got into his Jeep and drove without detours to the school. Normally Andrew took the longest possible route anywhere, sometimes adding 25 or 30 miles to the odometer

for absolutely no reason. There was nothing on earth Andrew loved more than driving. In his car he was removed from boys, removed from girls. (Andrew still thought of them as separate species.) Removed from school and conversation and pressure. He thought sometimes that instead of setting the world on fire with his brilliance and fame, that he would just be a cross-country trucker, and never do anything again but sit alone in a vehicle while the radio played.

What am I doing? he thought tiredly. What have I signed up for? I don't even know what this class is.

He was far too busy already, stretched by a hundred activities. The necessity to excel, to be best, to be photogenic, to be interesting, to be witty, was omnipresent. It was a good reason to drive alone. For a few miles, he could omit his tremendous efforts, he could just sit in the driver's seat and take the turns.

The road went where it went; he had no decisions to make, just the occasional steering. If only he could give up all activities and just drift like this, watching and following the road. But then he would be a loser.

It had been drilled into him, it was always being drilled into him, that he must never, never, never be a loser.

Mom had forgotten to take the camcorder inside the house. It lay on the front seat, begging to be stolen. Andrew drove with his left hand and gripped the camera with his right, waiting to set it on the floor of the car where it would be less visible to potential thieves.

I could be a cameraman, he thought suddenly. The world at the far end of the focus. Or a reporter. The world just something to scribble about in notebooks. Or a television newsman, for whom the world is just another candidate for coverage. People, just objects to be condensed into a thirty-second spot.

Andrew was filled with a brave, giddy feeling, as if he'd just flown solo for the first time in the world. Because he *knew*. He knew now what he was for, and why he was constructed that way! Yes! he thought, rejoicing. That's it!

I *am* for watching! And also, of course, for filming and writing and producing. Night Class, he thought again, and to him it sounded poetically dark, romantic, and doomed. He would take the camcorder into class, and begin his first film. He would use the shadows in which he had so often stood.

A vision of Mariah spun like falling snow before Andrew's eyes. Mariah, year after year, as intricate and beautiful and lacy as snowflakes under a microscope. She would be his film star.

It was time to begin. Time to be the best watcher and recorder there ever was. It didn't matter what Night Class was about. Andrew Todd had already decided on the action.

Autumn could have held hands with the velvet dark, and taken it home with her. There were no stars in the sky. She wondered if you could have a horoscope when there were no stars.

Perhaps I have a nightscope instead of a horoscope, thought Autumn, and if so, my scope is good. The dark and I are getting along fine.

She felt the lights of an approaching car at her back. Weirdly, it was now the light that frightened her. She didn't want to be caught in the headlights. Jumping off the road, Autumn slid behind a thick, thorny bush. She hardly minded the thorns, because it was such a friendly night that the thorns were not hurting her.

A Jeep zinged by.

She thought it might be Andrew.

Andrew collected girls like baseball cards, strewing them carelessly around him. Autumn believed that it was because that way, girls could never mean much; no single girl was worth more than any other girl.

Andrew's perfection was demanding. You wanted to be on his level and have his approval. She had always sensed that he did not entirely approve of Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle. Tonight she would show him what she was made of. A wonderful perfect personality that Andrew would want to have and to hold.

The outline of the school roof materialized, a darker dark than the night, jutting sharply into the sky.

There was something evilly complete in its darkness.

Dark as a cavewoman's dark.

Dark before fire. Dark before flame.

The night had not raised the hairs on the back of Autumn's neck, nor chilled her bone, but the dark of the school did. She ceased to be Autumn Ivers, California girl, and became some ancient ancestress of herself. Something primitive and animal.

Don't go in, warned her body.

Don't get close, said her soul.

Stay outside, cried the eons-old knowledge of things gone wrong.

Autumn held her foot in midair, listening for the footfall of danger. A voice said cheerfully, "Where did you come from? I didn't see you drive in."

The spell evaporated in the heat of Andrew's voice. Autumn forgot the warnings of her own body. She smiled because she loved company, and together they entered the building.

Andrew held off the dark, the way company does.

How nice, thought Autumn. It isn't dark if somebody is there with you.

She thought how nice that would sound on a greeting card, the kind you sent to a friend you missed. *It isn't dark if somebody is there with you.* Her mind's eye decorated it with little scrolls of flowers and hearts. She had been on the edge of something deep and important, but the thoughts, or Autumn herself, were lost.

Mariah did not notice that the school was dark, because her own headlights illuminated the drive. When she saw Andrew and Autumn vanishing inside the front door, Mariah was exalted. Was that the fourth name? The one she had not been able to read? How wonderful! Not only would she really and truly be in a class with Andrew Todd, but the other girl would be Autumn, with whom Mariah most wanted to be friends!

Oh, this was perfection! This was a dream come true!

Mariah did not bother to drive all the way around to the student parking lot. Instead she stopped right in front of the entry, deciding that parking rules were suspended under the circumstances.

She had no idea that other rules ... rules of the night ... these, too, had been suspended under the circumstances.

Chapter 3

ANDREW WAS USUALLY FULL of himself, but tonight Autumn sensed that he was way beyond that. Andrew was wired, the electricity inside him zinging through the halls as if he could light them on his own generator. Something wonderful had happened to Andrew. “Good day?” she asked.

Andrew did a cute little dance step in the middle of the hall. It was completely unlike him. He was so careful to be photogenic, and in fact, the step was a little clumsy. Autumn was touched. Andrew was too tickled with himself to care about his clumsiness.

“Is it night school?” she asked. “Are you expecting great things?”

Andrew shook his head. “No. Guess what, Autumn. I’m not expecting great things anymore! That’s the good news. Tonight on my way over here, a wonderful thing happened. I saw how it will be. Ordinary. Cameras and television stations.”

This hardly seemed ordinary to Autumn. It sounded like the usual starstruck hopes of the usual half-talented teenager. But he was cute, bouncy like this, and she liked him.

Vaguely, Autumn was aware of the rest of the building as they passed. Science labs on the left, doors tightly locked. Stairwells. Janitorial closets. Library, a single patron still there, surprising at such a late hour. She glanced over to identify the figure.

It was only Mr. Phillips, a substitute teacher. Most of the student body regarded Mr. Phillips as a substitute human as well; somebody with so little personality and worth that you could easily forget he had any at all.

Deep inside the library, at a long study table where he sat alone, Mr. Phillips did not look up. The two teenagers in the hall might have been invisible and soundless.

He's so pathetic, thought Autumn, rejoicing not to be pathetic like Mr. Phillips. Then she forgot him, because Andrew was bowing as deeply as a courtier, gesturing to the door through which she would pass.

"After you, Autumn Ivers," said Andrew, as if announcing her to the world, emcee of their own personal television show, and Autumn beamed at him, and never saw the threshold over which she passed.

Mariah bolted out of the car, barely remembering to lock up, and bounded toward the door through which Autumn and Andrew had passed. She found herself in a hallway that should have been completely familiar. After all, she was there five days a week. She knew its scent and its doors and its stairs. Tonight her feet continued to know, walking confidently along.

But only her feet.

There was something very, very wrong in the building.

Her body knew.

Her lungs were afraid. Her lungs ran out of air and gasped for breath. Her eyes were afraid, too, and opened painfully wide, and then narrowed, struggling to focus. Her heart lurched against her shrinking lungs. Her back wanted to press up against a wall, in case knives or eyes were behind her.

Her feet continued walking along, as if they knew nothing of what was going on in her heart and mind.

It was dark. So dark. *Too dark.*

The door closed behind her with a metallic slice, like a falling guillotine. Mariah whirled. She stared back, but she could not even see the door. She was alone in black, complete dark. The dark here was like a bad

night, slick and slippery. When she swallowed, the dark left an ugly taste in her mouth.

I'm in here with somebody, she thought. Those were prison doors. I'm alone in here with the vicious and the violent.

Her feet calmly turned and walked her on into the groping, searching dark. It was not Mariah feeling her way; it was the dark feeling her.

Go home, she said to herself. *Trust your senses*. If this were a lousy neighborhood downtown, you'd go back to the car.

But she did not go back. Her feet never paused.

She passed the library, whose interior wall of glass exposed stack upon stack of books. Usually the library had a warm comforting look, thousands of friendly books cozily ringing the room, and tired old vinyl couches waiting for silly kids to curl up on them.

Tonight the books seemed to arch and angle, as if they planned an attack. A single light was on. Mr. Phillips, one of the school's more pitiful subs, was in there working on papers.

How stranded he looked, one thin pale person among the dark brigades of books. He looked as if he were always alone, and would never be anything but alone.

Mariah averted her eyes. Mr. Phillips was in the wrong profession. He had no ability to teach, and did not get along well with teenagers, and yet he'd chosen the most difficult of teaching jobs—substituting.

Everybody knew that subs were fair game.

She almost rapped on the glass library door to ask if he were all right. But he was too unaware of her presence. He would jump out of his skin if she suddenly appeared. He was that kind of person. All the world startled him.

Her legs continued on down the corridor, as if they had an assignment of their own, and knew what pace to set.

She glanced back once, seeing Mr. Phillips from another angle. For a moment he was not Mr. Phillips at all. He was her brother Bevin, grown older into something even weaker. More desperate. Even more alone.

Mariah shuddered. What fate on earth was worse than being that lonely?

If I go on substituting dreams for real life, she thought, I will be that lonely one year.

Mariah's hands chilled, as if by some northern winter. Her imagination, which she counted on to toast her heart, froze her fingers instead. It's only Mr. Phillips, she said to herself, it's nobody. Stop thinking about Bevin.

Andrew appeared, bending back out of a classroom doorway to signal her. He was a beacon of blond hair and gold tan. One of the wonderful things about California was short sleeves on boys. You had their muscles to admire year-round.

Andrew was the sun and she was butter. Mariah wanted to melt. But, she warned herself sternly, if you get googly-eyed the minute you get close to him, he'll sit on the far side of the room forever. Remember that this is real life now. You can't revise it and do it over again in your mind until it's just as romantic as you can get it. You actually have to live tonight.

"Hey, Mariah!" Andrew called, so eagerly he sounded as if Mariah's presence was going to make his night. His laugh was different. He was bubbly and the smile was a little boy's. A smile she hadn't seen on his face since she'd first adored him, when he was eight.

"Andrew," she said breathlessly, "what's going on?"

He shrugged, but it was a happy, easy, delighted shrug. Somebody who really doesn't care what's going on, because life is too good to notice.

Is it me? she thought. Am I part of the goodness in Andrew's life?

So Mariah, too, dreaming and pretending, entered the classroom without seeing the threshold over which she passed.

Ned slipped nervously into the building, and walked jerkily down the hall, staying very close to the walls, as if the walls were his friend and the open center of the hallway was his enemy. , He had been teased about this ridiculous habit for years, and had thought it conquered. In disgust, he saw himself still wall-crawling. With a distinct effort, he forced himself not to walk as if something were chasing him.

Regardless of how skinny and featherweight he was, Ned felt he had feet of cement. His feet were born heavy enough to throw into the ocean and drown him. He did not know how to be light and easy. And he was quite sure that you got somewhere with girls only if you were relaxed. How did you do that? The mere fact of being with a girl meant it was impossible to relax.

Mariah and Autumn.

He tried to picture himself actually inviting one of those girls to go somewhere with just him, Ned.

This was so scary he could actually feel the water closing over his face, as the cement on his feet yanked him to the ocean floor.

Ned didn't aspire to be like Andrew with girls. That would have been Olympic. Ned would just like to have a girl of his own. He pretended that he could sit next to Mariah or Autumn and actually flirt. (Whatever flirting was.) His only real hope was that they would actually call him by name. Few did. He wasn't worth it. A nod or a "hey" or a flickering-away, half-smile was the most Ned ever got.

He hardly noticed how unlit the corridor was and never glanced into the library. He was completely absorbed by his own shortcomings. That was, of course, one of his own shortcomings.

Andrew popped a head out of a classroom and waved, to show Ned where they were meeting. Ned waved back, but Andrew had already vanished. Story of my life, thought Ned; they never even give me a chance to answer.

Ned didn't see the door through which he passed. He was far too busy scouting out the expressions of the other kids in the class, Were they glad to see him, too? Just once, he wanted people to look up when he came in, and be glad that he had joined them.

What I would do, thought Ned, to make these people glad to see me.

"Welcome," said the instructor.

The room was very dark.

Darkness crawled under Mariah's skin like slugs under dead leaves. Darkness shifted position inside her, like a colony of poisonous insects building nests.

She did not want to be welcome here. She did not want to be the kind of person that the instructor would be glad to see.

Not that Mariah could see. She could not even see Andrew. The four of them had blended into the dark like furniture in unused rooms. Mariah's thoughts seemed even more unreal than usual, as if her own brain just replayed tapes of itself.

I no longer exist, thought Mariah. I am just the imprint of myself.

Andrew felt like the negatives of photographs. He was not a real person, but a future picture of one: Right now, he was frosty and gleaming where he ought to be dark, and dark where he ought to be color.

He held the camcorder in his lap, but did not try to focus it. He couldn't even focus his mind right now, never mind a film.

His utter delight with his discovery in the car mixed with the fear that sifted through the room, and like opposite electrons, his fear and joy canceled each other. He was no emotion at all: He was neutral.

This is good, thought Andrew Todd. A reporter must always be neutral. To have no emotion at all is good. This is just the kind of Night Class I need.

The four students were visible in a moonlit way. Gray and black silhouettes. It was romantic, thought Autumn. Sort of like opening a valentine in the dark. Not so much night class as dusk class.

Autumn could hardly even see the instructor. He, she, or possibly it stood before them like darker dark; a more knowing, experienced dark. Autumn wanted to make it the class cheer: Go, dark!

There were but four chairs in the room, and no desks, so there had been few choices in seating. The row was straight across. When she turned, Autumn saw the others' profiles all in a row. Closest to her, Ned's was misshapen: nose too big, forehead too broad, chin too awkward. Andrew's was classic, while Mariah's was perkier and more childish than Autumn would have expected. I wonder what my profile is, she thought, and she hoped the others would study her.

The instructor's voice was deeply appealing, rich and warm and velvet like the night through which she had passed. Usually, Autumn lost interest in a teacher before the teaching even began. Tonight she felt liquid in the instructor's presence: cool water in a vase, waiting to be used.

"This," said the instructor, "is Night Class."

Autumn felt that the dark was snuggling up to her. She could not quite see the rest anymore, but this did not matter. All was well. All was good.

She was half-sleeping.

Perhaps I have been hypnotized, thought Autumn. I wonder how he did it. I don't remember staring at anything.

"We will learn," said the instructor, "to control the dark."

A sort of self-help class about the dark, thought Autumn. How California.

"Our species, the human being, shrinks from the Night. Our species tries to get rid of the Night. We have been trying since fire was found to destroy the Night. We fight back with lamps and lights and bulbs and reflectors. For us, Night is filled with unknown and horror."

Not really, thought Autumn. I had no problem walking alone in the night.

"Suppose," said the instructor, "that you could own the night."

What would I do with it after I had it? thought Autumn.

She was distracted by the thought that she also had to get home in the dark. Should she ask for a ride home with Andrew? With Mariah? Or slip away unnoticed, and walk that mile in reverse?

"There will be homework," said the instructor. "There will be assignments."

That was only reasonable. It was school, after all. Not that Autumn always finished her assignments in regular school.

But at that moment, during that fraction of a thought, Night Class ceased to have anything to do with regular school.

Warmth left the instructor's voice. Raw and chilled like meat, the voice seemed to bleed on top of Autumn's head.

She hated the thought. She tried to scour it out of her mind, but shadows obscured her mind from herself.

"Tonight," said the voice, "we will choose our first SC."

What is an SC? thought Autumn.

Autumn could not even see her hands on her lap. She knotted her fingers together and nothing happened. She had no fingers, no substance.

The room was not only very dark, but very silent. Autumn could not even hear the others breathing.

Perhaps they were *not* breathing. Perhaps they had left, or were dead.

Perhaps she was the only person here.

“Anyone who wishes to drop out,” said the instructor, “must do so now.”

Autumn wished to drop out. She wished to get up and scream and run and shriek. I’m dropping out, she tried to say, but her tongue did not seem to be there, anymore than her hands had been there, or the other three had been there. She was alone, without even her body for company.

“Good,” said the instructor.

There was nothing good in his voice.

There was nothing good in the room.

“I am glad to hear the silence,” said the instructor, and horribly, his voice was also silent. Autumn could hear it, but it did not speak. This was like reading a soundtrack. You couldn’t do it, but she was doing it. I have to get out of here, she thought. My body told me on the way in that the place was too dark, much too dark. Go dark! I have to get out of the dark—

You are accepted into this course of study, said the instructor. A soundless burst of laughter filled the room, which was not possible, either: It was like reading a comic book, where a huge dripping black word LAUGHTER filled the panel, but there was nothing funny and nothing comic in this room.

The body Autumn no longer had could not panic: Its heart could not beat faster, its lungs could not starve for oxygen.

And its legs could no longer run.

There will be, the instructor added, and even though it was silent, it filled the room and her ears and her soul, *no way to drop out of Night Class now.*

Chapter 4

IT WAS LIKE THE earthquake of the previous year. The world shifted under their feet. Ten seconds, fifteen seconds of earthquake and they had no longer occupied the same room. But in this case, they no longer occupied the same bodies.

They were shifted through the fault lines of the universe.

It hit Ned ferociously, as if he'd stupidly hung a huge mirror over his bed prior to the earthquake, and now a spear of glass had sliced his heart and soul.

Ned had to get in touch with the others. He had to establish that they and he still existed, still occupied the same earth, but his hands would not do it, for he no longer had hands. He would have to do it by voice, and yet prevent the voice from revealing to these kids, whom he still wanted to impress, that he was terrified. *This is so weird*, said Ned. He seemed to hear himself off a tape, as if he no longer existed.

If I'm dead, he thought, they could just play me back and listen to me anyway. Please answer me, please one of you answer me.

It's darker than any dark I've ever been dark in, if you know what I mean, said Autumn.

Ned knew what she meant. He loved her for speaking, for letting him know that wherever he was, he wasn't alone in there.

It doesn't feel normal, said Autumn. Her nonvoice was more high-pitched, more nervous, than her usual voice.

Ned and Autumn both recognized the instructor's voice when it came, even though it, too, had no sound. *You are disembodied now. Naturally when you have no vocal cords your voice will sound different.*

Autumn was so relieved. The instructor, the leader, was still there. He/she/it might be creepy, but all was not lost as long as an adult was present. Although she was not sure “adult” was the word. Old, yes. Primitive ancient old.

Mariah was trying not to participate. I’m shadow? she thought. I have no flesh and bone? I’m darkness through which solid things can now pass?

She tried very hard to climb out of her too active imagination and find the real world here. What is really going on? she thought. Four people sitting in some creepy classroom with the lights, turned off, listening to a voice that has no sound? Why aren’t we just getting up and leaving?

Perhaps it’s a psychology test. The sort where people get tested on remote cameras to see how they behave in weird situations. Perhaps everybody here but me is in on it, and they want to gauge my reaction, see what I do. Perhaps I’m the only one being tested.

But what could the test be?

I should have dropped out, thought Mariah. Even if Andrew is here in the class, I should have dropped out. What is an SC? I don’t want to find out what an SC is.

What if we get stuck here? cried Autumn, and her voice was sort of out loud, but not really. *What if we can’t get back?*

Mariah might not exist, but she still had temperature, and hers dropped to zero. Fear froze her. What if we can’t get back? It was an old fear for Mariah: getting stuck in the pretend, unable to get back to the real.

In this class, said the instructor, *we will control the dark. It will not control us. The dark here is warmly scented. Let go of your thinking. Let go of your imagining. Feel how the dark supports you.*

Disembodied, thought Andrew. How astonishing. I must write about it. Any newspaper, any grocery tabloid, would buy my article. Or perhaps I

can film us as we don't exist! Any television talk show would buy my footage in a heartbeat! Yes! This is the beginning!

I regret, said the instructor, that you will not be able to capture yourself on film, Andrew. The shadow state does not show up on camera. But you may bring your camera along on our first expedition.

It was most odd to be watching, but have no body and no eyes and no ears to do it with. Even more oddly, Andrew could lift the camcorder but not feel it between the fingers he did not have.

Our first expedition, thought Andrew. That implies that we will have more than one. I wonder what an SC is. Do they film?

The instructor was right. Autumn could actually rest on the dark. It was not the sweet dark she had brought from home. It was a heavy slick gross dark, an oil spill of a dark. She felt it drip from her thoughts. Her thoughts would suffocate in this kind of dark unless she shared them.

Guess what, Autumn confided to the class she could not see. There was a kind of frenzied shiver in her confession. I'm here to break away. To leave the group. To do things on my own. To be just Autumn, and not Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle.

The rest of the class was impressed. *Autumn, they said, that's wonderful. You'll be an individual, not just a slot. You need to know yourself,* they all agreed, *be your own person.*

Ned, too, had leaned back in the dark and the dark stripped him of failure and fault, leaving him exactly like the others. He felt safe enough to ask a very important question. *But what,* said Ned cautiously, *if your own person isn't very exciting?*

Some people are late bloomers, Andrew assured him.

Andrew, nobody likes blooming late, Ned said, confessing as easily as Autumn. *Everybody likes blooming on time.*

That's so poetic, said Andrew; Ned, that's wonderful. I can use that for film narration.

To think that Andrew had complimented him. Ned felt great. He was usually very aware of his body, because he had spent so much of his life tripping and stumbling. It was pure joy to have no substance. He had shed the great inconvenience of body. He was floating, and it was warm and cushioned. And he, Ned, was inching into this wonderful group.

Andrew Todd would use his words in the narrative of a film. Ned was willing to do anything for Andrew. He might let me do more than write a single line, thought Ned, he might let me help, and have my name in the credits, and work with him again.

And now, said the instructor, pulling them back, the dark.

They straightened, and class began, and it was time to pay attention.

Andrew himself could see perfectly. It was just that there was nothing to see but shadow. He tried to focus on the instructor. Andrew wondered if the instructor was human. Was it instead a computer? Screen? Some sort of Internet? A hologram? Living smoke?

We are now, said the instructor, his voice shifting the shadows, becoming one. We are a team now, and we will do everything together, and do it well. We are becoming night people.

His voice lulled them, like a mother with a baby.

The room grew even darker, as if they were in a dark glass bottle whose cap was being tightened.

Suppose, said the instructor, that you own the shadows and the sounds of night, and are in charge of all that is hidden and secret.

Mariah snapped awake. The very word secret opened all her doors. Was the instructor implying that people who owned the night could own the secrets?

I don't want Andrew to know the extent of my crush. I don't want Autumn to know that I wish I could be her, or be part of her group. I don't want us to talk without voices and see without eyes. I want regular friendships the regular way.

Mariah sat very still, wanting it to be over, wanting to be home.

We begin, said the instructor, like a beloved newscaster giving the daily dose of information, *we begin tonight by finding an SC.*

It's wrong, thought Mariah. I can feel how wrong it is. I don't even know what an SC is and I can tell I shouldn't, either.

Fear pierced her as if she still existed.

Have you ever been afraid for no reason? asked the instructor. *Once, were you home alone in the dark, and did a stair creak and frighten you? Did a light go off when there was nobody to do it? Did a door open with nobody to open it?*

Mariah trembled. I've been afraid for Bevin, she thought. Afraid he would do something terrible in order to escape all that's terrible, I'm afraid now. I'm afraid he's at home, wishing for ... but what does Bevin wish for?

Did you ever sense that somebody unknown is in there with you? In your room? Under your bed? Touching your hand?

Ned shrugged. The dark is fine with me, he thought. It's people who make me panic. I've been afraid of society. It's true. I've been afraid of the gathering of people, of crowds and groups and pairs and classes.

Fear, whispered the teacher. *Especially when you are alone. Especially when you are alone in the dark.*

Autumn closed her eyes to keep away the dark, but it went after her, its little fingers curling around her. She had not been afraid in the dark, walking over here. But I should have been, she thought. It was out there

with me. It knew, even when I didn't know, like a gang looking out of broken windows, waiting for a victim, fear knew I was out there all alone.

I've been afraid, thought Andrew. I see it now. Afraid of life. I've kept busy to cover up life. Blessed dark, for letting me see myself. I am a watcher. A reporter and a filmer of other people's lives. I don't have to live my own.

We take control of the Night, said the instructor. *We bring fear to the weak and panic to the fragile.*

That doesn't sound right, thought Mariah. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

We begin, explained the voice, *by being scouts. We want to find an example of a person alone in the dark.*

The instructor required them to say this sentence over and over. *A person alone in the dark.* Autumn and Andrew and Ned repeated it until it had no meaning.

A person alone in the dark.

A person alone in the dark.

Perhaps it was mass hysteria, like witches in Salem. For there were Autumn and Andrew and Ned oddly indistinguishable from each other, as if they were the same person, or dressed in the same uniform. What could those three possibly have in common? And yet they sat half-rocking, dreamy profiles content and ready. Ready for what? *A person alone in the dark.*

Hypnosis, thought Mariah. Definitely hypnosis. It didn't touch me. When the psychologists finish scoring my testing, will I turn out stronger or weaker or just different?

Stronger, Mariah, said the teacher. *You are much much stronger than the rest. It is a wonderful facility you have, to be so strong. You have*

potential. You may be the foremost student in our class.

Me? Strong? Mariah doubted it. In her heart of hearts (and nobody had a heart more layered than Mariah's) she knew she was weaker, because all her triumphs were pretend.

Pretend ... Andrew ... she'd forgotten Andrew. She was sitting next to him and had forgotten him. Incredible. What did it mean?

The instructor's voice went even beyond silence. It was inside her head, a little whispering pine, rustling only in Mariah's dark. *I know your secrets, Mariah*, said the instructor. *Shall I reveal them? Shall I tell Andrew and Autumn the content of your dreams? Shall I let Andrew know that you stalk him in your heart?*

I don't stalk him! she thought. I love him.

Are you sure he would call it love? Are you sure he wouldn't call it a sick, depraved obsession? The instructor's laugh swelled like a helium balloon inside her head, filling the place where her lovely daydreams used to be.

Please don't tell! I won't have a chance with Andrew if he knows the truth. Autumn would laugh at me. She'd tell Julie and Brooke and Danielle and they'd laugh at me. Andrew would avoid me in ...

I might tell. I want you to know that. I might tell everybody everything, Mariah.

So her secrets were the property of this screenless, pageless, bodyless thing up there talking.

Andrew, Ned, and Autumn awoke from their rocking repetition.

Mariah, give us an SC, said the instructor.

What is an SC?

A person alone in the dark. Name one.

Of course, the name that came immediately to Mariah's mind was Bevin, and she shot that out of existence, keeping her brother's name unthought, unworded, unformed. For if ever a person was alone in the dark, it was Bevin. She could not name Bevin. He was too close to the edge.

A name, please, Mariah, said the voice sharply.

Come on, Mariah, said Andrew impatiently. *He knows you've thought of somebody.*

Come on, Mariah, said Autumn anxiously. *This is scary. Just name somebody alone in the dark, and you can end it.*

Or begin it, thought Mariah. What will it begin when I name a person alone in the dark?

Come on, Mariah, said Ned. *All we need is a name.*

Mariah kept the two syllables of Bevin's name to herself.

Fine, said the voice. *Which secret shall I discuss first, Mariah?*

What secrets? asked Andrew.

He actually turned to her, and she actually saw him: not the real Andrew; perhaps nobody ever knew the real somebody else, but a facsimile of Andrew; the negative of his photograph. She could see his waiting half-smile, wanting to know the secrets. And she knew absolutely that Andrew would feel invaded by her daydreams; he would feel she had no right to try to own him when he hadn't offered.

Mr. Phillips, said Mariah quickly. Mr. Phillips, after all, was only a substitute person himself. *Mr. Phillips, alone in the library,* said Mariah quickly, *he'll be the perfect SC.*

There was quiet.

A rich satisfied quiet, like after a good meal.

Four students and an instructor contemplated the existence of Mr. Phillips and his perfection as an SC.

But what does SC stand for? asked Autumn.

An SC? repeated the instructor. Through the dark came a moonlike slice of smile.

That's what the guillotine cut off when I came in the door, thought Mariah, that piece of smile.

An SC is a Scare Choice. Thank you, Mariah, for supplying tonight's Scare Choice.

Chapter 5

THE FOUR CLASS MEMBERS and their instructor were nothing but darkness, shifting and reforming. They filtered into the library like poison into a town reservoir.

Mariah tried to prevent her shade from joining the group. What was going to happen here? What were they going to do? She didn't want to do it. But she no longer had control. She was merely part of a bleaker, deeper darkness.

Bevin is safe, Mariah told herself, that's what counts. I didn't give them Bevin's name.

Through a dark now full of herself and the others, Mariah saw the Scare Choice. He didn't know yet. They were at that fraction in time where things could still stop; where the victim didn't yet know he was a victim.

Ned kept himself in the center of the class, for there he felt protected from his own weakness. What if the class realized that he was a lonely castoff himself? Only inches from being a Scare Choice?

Although Ned had never heard of an SC till a minute ago, he saw that Mariah had named a perfect one. The man reeked weakness, nervous fingers gripping a pencil too hard, shallow forehead wrinkled with worry that he might incorrectly grade some other teacher's papers. Probably he felt protected by the knowledge that he was the only occupant of the building.

But he wasn't the only occupant.

Night Class was there.

The Scare Choice sensed something. He shuffled two papers for no reason except to occupy his fingers. He looked out of the corner of his

eyes without moving his head. A little twitch appeared in his cheek.

Andrew squinted into his camera. How metal and plastic could pass through a plaster wall fascinated Andrew. The class had not existed as they passed through the walls of the library and surrounded the SC, and yet the camcorder did exist, and somehow it had also moved through the wall.

The shadows he filmed seemed to have body, not merely light deflection. Andrew wondered how much would actually show up on the film. He circled the SC for a better angle.

The SC noticed. The SC held himself very still, trying to analyze the change in the atmosphere around him. It was an interesting reaction. Very primitive. Like a white rabbit freezing in the snow to hide.

Andrew focused, and now the thin nervous facial features of the SC appeared right in the little crosshatch. Sort of like aiming a rifle, thought Andrew. I'm shooting him.

It's like joining a very exclusive club, thought Autumn, just as she passed through the library walls. She had always wanted to be in a club with passwords and secrets. Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle did everything in public so as to be noticed and admired. But she, Autumn, would do things in the dark. It was so strange, to have no body. She who admired her body and its clothing, her body and its lovely hair, her body and its beautiful face—she had no body right now. She was not even a voice.

And yet, the SC knew she was there.

The SC wet his lips and began mouth-breathing, already too frightened to get enough air. Autumn could not get over how much like a little animal the SC was now: panting heaving chest, darting eyes, helpless surrender even before anything had happened. And he went on trying to look normal, still correcting papers, still moving his pencil, still hunched down close to the desk surface.

But every primitive response in his body—for the SC still had his body—had gone into high gear. His body knew while his mind was still rejecting it. There's no evidence, his mind and his eyes were saying, calm down. But his body knew.

Autumn, too, knew.

She was comfortable in a tight group, had been part of a tight group for a long, long time. She liked the spread of groups: the way you were included in the action yet excluded from the blame.

If she let the SC's name enter her mind, if she pictured his actual function, if she remembered him failing in front of a class, she felt sorry for him.

But as SC, he was merely a set of initials.

He wasn't somebody. He didn't matter.

Andrew zoomed in close, enlarging the SC's frightened features. Shadows moved around the SC like smoke in the wind. The eyes of the SC scrambled, looking for an answer, and yet wanting none.

He thinks if he doesn't really move, nothing will really be here, Andrew decided. Guess what, SC. We're really here.

A single ceiling light had been enough for Mr. Phillips to work by, but now it was too dim, broken by the shadows crossing beneath it. The Scare Choice shrank, hunching into his ill-fitting cardigan. He pressed his lips tightly together and forced himself to look left and right. But he saw nothing, because there was nothing to see.

Andrew circled the victim. He had no idea what was going to happen to the SC, but he wanted to get it from the right angle. He had to improvise, and it brought out the best in him.

The instructor turned a page in a book. It was a distinctive sound. Paper against paper. Only fingers leafing pages could have made that

sound. But the SC was the only person there. The SC gasped a little and whirled to see who had turned that page.

But of course nobody had. The library remained empty.

Silence gathered. The SC twitched. He rubbed sweaty palms against his trousers. Once again he picked up his marking pencil.

The instructor coughed.

The SC leaped to his feet, stumbling twice in a circle, struggling to catch a glimpse of who was behind him, coughing. Of course, nobody was behind him. Nobody was in front of him, either. He braced trembling fingertips against the table rim and looked back and forth so often and so quickly he must have gotten dizzy from it.

The shadows swirled, but nobody existed to cast those shadows. The SC whimpered, “Who’s there?” His voice was strangled, though nothing had touched his throat.

Yet.

A chair scraped.

“Who’s there?” said the SC desperately. His eyes flitted toward the only exit. He was terrified of standing still and terrified of moving. How thick the dark was between him and the way out.

Andrew was riveted. If fear kept accelerating at this rate, it would be like filming the collapse of a building. It would be classic. He could hardly go on filming for thinking of what he had already captured on film.

Mariah thought of the times she had been alone in the dark. Lying rigid in bed when her parents were out, listening to the creaks and groans of her own house as if there were goblins and monsters. Picturing rapists and burglars with knives when the wind scraped branches across the glass of her window. Seeing horror lurk where there was only a coat hanging from a hook.

I'm that easy to scare, thought Mariah. What are we doing? Why are we doing it?

This is night school, Autumn reminded herself. So even if it doesn't seem right, it probably is. The instructor is in charge. He knows these things. Probably this is going to teach the SC that he shouldn't have a teaching job. After this, he'll work with computers in some fluorescent-lighted office. Or maybe it will make him strong and after this, he'll be tough in the dark.

But he was not getting tougher. He was getting weaker. And it was very quick, like a nature film of jackal versus newborn antelope. How easy it was to terrify an adult to whom absolutely nothing was happening.

Autumn was slightly disappointed. Why wasn't the SC putting up a fight? Wouldn't it be more interesting to observe if he fought back, instead of dissolving like powder in water? She found herself getting irritated with the SC. If he was such a weakling, he deserved it.

Ned yearned to help the SC. But nobody else was objecting, and after all, not a whole lot was really happening. It wasn't as if they were putting a knife in him, or hanging him by his ankles in a shark tank. Ned decided that things were a matter of degree, and this was very little, and so he didn't have to help.

Mariah found she'd been holding her breath, and even though she was shadow and didn't have lungs, she let out a long, fat huff of air. Since there was no body to do any breathing but the SC, he stared at Mariah's shadow in utter horror.

Andrew clicked his tongue in appreciation. The film of this was priceless; he would blow this one up; it would be the trailer for the movie he'd follow it with; it would chill the hearts of people who loved scary stuff.

Of course the tongue click scared the SC even more. Andrew was laughing into the camcorder. Imagine being scared of so little!

Following the age-old need of people to turn the lights on, the SC summoned his courage and headed for the far wall on which the bank of switches lay.

He did not make it.

A shadow reached it first, extinguishing the only existing light.

Autumn's shadow.

Autumn had turned into a cat, perhaps, teasing the mouse she would eventually strike down. She knew how badly the SC needed light, so she took it away. There wasn't enough going on for Autumn; she wanted to up the ante.

Now not even the shadows could see the shadows.

And the Choice—he could see nothing. He barged into a tall stack of books, which gave Andrew an idea, and Andrew pushed a book off a shelf. The heavy book fell flat with a thud like a fist hitting a jaw.

The SC banged into a wall. They could hear his fingernails scrabbling against painted surfaces. “Please!” he cried, admitting that the dark was in control, and he was not.

A single light came back on and the SC was revealed, cowering, hair and cardigan askew, back pressed up against a wall.

The single light came from Andrew's camcorder: a camera suspended in midair, filming without human hands and without robotic fingers.

The SC's long wavering scream started at the top and broke like glass at the bottom. Abandoning his papers, the SC fought his way to the exit, battling shadows, his fingers leaping like little separate people.

Finally he was out, sobbing in the hall, trying to reach the exit from that dark place, too. He would only find more dark. But at least, different

dark. Not trapped, indoor dark. Wide, unknown, outside dark.

Andrew lowered the camcorder. The minute his eye was removed from the camera, he returned to reality—such as it was.

Papers were scattered across two tables. Clearly, quizzes for a social studies class, the kind with long answers that take forever to grade.

My class! thought Andrew, startled, seeing his own paper in the stack. And that was no SC. That was Mr. Phillips.

I didn't do it, he thought quickly, as if answering a judge. I was just the cameraman. I just videotaped what the others did. You can't count it against me. All I did was bump into a book and click my tongue. Nothing. Doesn't count.

The class members had returned to normal. They had flesh and bone and blood once more, and were clothed, their feet encased in shoes.

Andrew had almost lifted the camera again when he decided not to film the class. He would edit them out. Pretend they hadn't been part of the story. He rested the camcorder on his shoulder. It gave him something to do, made him official, removed him from responsibility. Reporters didn't have to worry about what happened, they just had to record it.

"Well done!" said the instructor. Voice was back. Sound and volume and texture had returned.

Autumn still could not really see the instructor. She rubbed her eyes, to see if it was her. How blurry the instructor was; how distant, even though he was right there.

I wanted more to happen, thought Autumn Ivers. I wasn't satisfied. I was a predator and I wanted the kill, not just the trembling. "What happens now?" she said quickly. I'm not coming back to this class, she thought. I don't care if it is school, and I don't care if I will get control of the night,

and I don't care if I do want to be friends with Mariah and Andrew and Ned, I'm not coming here to, well—watch—

“To watch yourself,” said the instructor pleasantly. “The Scare Choice awakens interesting appetites, don't you think, Autumn? It leaves a taste for more, Autumn. Tell me, Autumn, what was the best part?”

Autumn put her hand over her mouth to stop her answer from coming out. She wanted the rest to like her.

“The best part was turning out the single light, wasn't it, Autumn, and knowing that your move started his scream. It was an excellent scream, wasn't it?” He showed his smile, a cold bluish white like the thinnest sliver of disappearing moon.

“I didn't know what I was doing,” she said quickly, “and I'm not coming back. There was no reason for this, and I'm not the type of person who—”

“But you are, Autumn,” said the instructor. “You *are* that type of person. And this is just the beginning. You will be an excellent student. One of my best, I am sure.”

“I'm dropping out,” she said.

“There is no possibility of dropping out.”

As shadows had filled the library earlier, now cold—true wintry cold—cold the California coast rarely knew—filled the room and their veins.

“As for what will happen now,” said the instructor, “that is out of our control, isn't it? I will dispose of these tests. The SC will have no explanation. He can hardly say he was too scared to finish correcting. I wonder what he will say to the regular teacher. I wonder if they will hire him here again. Perhaps this is his only job, and he will no longer have it. Perhaps his life will be ruined. You can never tell where small things will

end up. They snowball. You, an excellent class, true achievers, you have started the snowball.”

Mariah was shocked. “Could that much happen?”

The smile was back. It had no teeth and no lips; it was just a curve like the blade of an alien knife. “It doesn’t take much. People are so very afraid of what they can’t see or understand. He was an excellent Scare Choice, Mariah. Thank you.”

Mariah did not want to be thanked. She did not want to feel any responsibility in this at all. “I didn’t do a thing,” she said quickly.

“My dear, you offered up the name. If there is any responsibility here, it is undoubtedly yours.”

“That isn’t true,” said Mariah. She did not want to be called “my dear.”

The instructor darkened, but not like shadow. Like the dank smoke of arson. “I do not advise that any of you contradict me. There are consequences. Come. Sit where your Scare Choice sat.”

And so the four teenagers were forced to sit at the long library table where Mr. Phillips had tried to correct papers. He had left fear behind like a scent, and they choked on it.

Ned stared at the floor. Mr. Phillips wasn’t actually hurt, so it doesn’t count, he told himself. He probably got to his car. He’ll be fine. He’ll drive home and calm down and he can think up a good excuse for losing the tests.

The instructor was no longer shadow, but thick, sucking mud that held them by the ankles. They tried not to breathe, lest they catch whatever he was. But they were already caught, of course. “Andrew, the video, please. Such a nice touch, and so thoughtful of you.”

Andrew did not want to show it, not now. He no longer knew what had seemed so brilliant, so cinematic. Now that the subject was no longer an SC, but pathetic terrified Mr. Phillips, Andrew wanted the film not to exist. Only minutes ago he had thought watching was a useful profession. Now he wanted to be rid of the evidence.

“Why, Andrew, you were so proud of your work. And I’m sure it is excellent work. You are always brilliant, are you not? You always excel, do you not? Show the film.”

It was not the dark that was under control, but the class.

Andrew felt obedient, and he was unaccustomed to this. His parents did not give orders; they had family conferences and came to decisions. But here, orders were proper, and following orders was more proper. Andrew showed the film.

It was brilliant. How vividly it displayed cringing and creeping and crying out—the change from man to animal.

“At the end of the semester,” said the instructor, “we will have a party. We will invite our Scare Choices. It is amusing to preserve this sort of thing on tape. People are ashamed to see how they behaved under stress. We will laugh at them. There is nothing quite so destructive as being laughed at.”

Ned knew the truth of that. He’d spent years being laughed at. People remembered you that way, too. They remembered your shame and helplessness and failure, and they remembered the pleasure they felt laughing, proving that you were crumby and they were worthy.

He looked at Andrew’s camcorder; the power of that horrible little machine. What kind of party did they have in mind? What other Scare Choices were they going to make? What if they chose Ned himself, who had been a Choice, a butt to be scorned, for so many years?

Andrew could capture Ned forever on film. Ned would be laughed at year in, year out, by each successive class.

“Stand up, Class,” said the instructor. His blue smile was so cold, so thin, so luminous.

How quickly and completely they obeyed.

“Was this good entertainment?” asked the instructor.

It was a club. Autumn had been correct. And this was the initiation. Admitting that the Scare Choice had been good entertainment.

Nobody wanted to say that. Nobody did.

“Look at Mariah,” the instructor said to the other three. How quickly they obeyed, looking seriously and carefully at Mariah.

Mariah didn’t look back. Her heart was pounding hideously; she was going to have a heart attack. She knew why she had been chosen. She had the most to lose. Bevin and her secrets.

“Mariah, was this good entertainment?” His smile lengthened beyond the edges of his face, extending out into the room to cut her. He was no hologram. He was a demon, and a demon wins by possession. He had her secrets. She could not let him possess Bevin.

It’s only a sentence, Mariah told herself. Just because I say it doesn’t mean I agree with it. It’s okay to say something if you’re in danger, or your brother is in danger. “It was good entertainment.”

“Thank you, Mariah.” The instructor exhaled like car exhaust. Mariah was breathing in poison; she might as well have been hooking her lungs to the exhaust pipe of a ruined car. “Tell us again, Mariah.”

Exhaust poison you could see only in certain weather, at certain temperatures. And the temperature here was more terrible than anything Mariah had ever known. But she had to breathe it in anyway, or expose her brother and open her secrets.

“It was good entertainment,” said Mariah. It was easier to say this time. After she had said it five times, she hardly even knew what it meant.

Then it was Autumn’s turn.

Then Ned’s.

Finally Andrew’s.

They were exhausted from saying it, as if they had just come from gym. Perhaps they had. Night Class was truly a workout.

“Your homework,” said the instructor, his smile expanding to a half moon, hideously blue, “is to choose an ETS.”

They knew now how class worked. They did not argue. They did not say, But we don’t want to do this again; it was mean and it was pointless. Instead, they said, “What is an ETS?”

“An Easy To Scare. Remember that you are beginners. You want to find somebody who is already fearful, whose life is already difficult, for whom the dark is already a threat.”

Four teenagers tried to keep out the images of victims: pitiful people. Any school has its share. The ones nobody cares about, the ones chosen by the pack to rip and tear.

Now the smile was the whole moon: fat, bloated, backlit with pale evil. “We will meet again next Wednesday.” They were escorted out of the library, moved down the hall, brought to the outside door. “Do not forget your homework. If you fail to bring a good ETS, I will pick one myself. How unfortunate it would be if I were to decide upon one of you. Ask yourself if you wish to choose the next SC ... or be chosen.”

Chapter 6

IT WAS LIKE LEAVING a movie.

Plot and actors stayed inside the theater, flat on the screen.

Moviegoers emerged into the warmish, coolish air that was California in winter, surprised to find that everything outside was normal. Cars were parked, traffic was moving, restaurants were open, red lights blinked.

There was that moment of standing on the sidewalk while the movie evaporated, pulling themselves out of the pretend and into the real. Night Class was nothing but a movie they had watched, or read the script for.

They said pointless things: It's nice out, where are you parked? watch the step. Autumn felt as if she should have had popcorn. And just the way she felt when leaving a gripping horror movie, where heads were wrenched off living bodies and sharp blades slashed from behind shimmering curtains, Autumn was swept with relief that it didn't count. That was the neat thing about scary movies; you could go in there and be absolutely terrified, and maybe even scream a little bit between handfuls of popcorn and sips of Coke, but then you walked outside and it was nothing. Nothing at all.

"Well, *that* was weird!" said Autumn, in a larger voice than usual, to fill up the space.

"I think we got hypnotized or something," said Ned, laughing loudly. "Who was that teacher anyway?"

"She never said," Autumn remembered.

"Did you think it was a she?" asked Ned. "I thought it was an it."

"I think it was all three," said Autumn. "I think it was she, he, *and* it." Autumn stretched, her whole long slim body a yawn, and embraced the

easy soft California night, fingertips thrust to the sky.

“You look like a rain dancer,” teased Ned.

Autumn giggled. She giggled well. It was always possible to join in on Autumn’s giggles. Even for boys like Ned who did not know how to giggle. “We just walked out of a building where the teacher is gender free and face free,” Autumn pointed out. “I’m spooked. So I’m *despooking* myself.”

Andrew stayed spooked. He’d had years of training to be photogenic. His mouth and cheeks and eyes were always in the position he required of them.

Unlike Mr. Phillips.

Andrew swallowed. He touched his hair, which was straight and neatly trimmed, and ran his fingers along his jaw, which was strong and certain. They felt like props. Like makeup.

For Andrew the movie they had just left continued to play in his mind, exactly the way he had filmed it. He saw the dim light like a sick halo behind Mr. Phillips’s thinning hair. He saw the peeled back face of a man reduced to a gibbering animal banging into walls and scrabbling for switches.

Andrew’s face did not quiver, did not tense, but his cheeks, without permission, went hot and red. He controlled only the muscles, not the blood pressure. I’ve made my first movie, thought Andrew. And it was mean. We were bullies. I’m not on the film, though. I was behind the camera, not in front of it. It’s great work, my first film. I can be proud of it, I can be—

He was not proud of it. The color stayed in his face, marking him out, although in the dark of night, none of the others could see.

Should he edit out Mr. Phillips's terror? But there was no film without the terror.

"Great idea!" said Mariah.

Andrew thought she meant his film, and was shocked. How could sweet nice Mariah think that film was great?

But she had meant Autumn's *despook* dance. She joined in, and again Andrew saw the world like a film, and the girls were half morning television exercise video, and half strangers in the night, beckoning to men.

Ned and Andrew joined them, awkwardly and ineptly. And with that, whatever had happened inside the school became absurd. Something to jump up and down about. Something to laugh about.

"The Night Class Dance Troupe," Mariah named them.

Andrew knew a cue when he heard one. He swung Mariah in a ballroom dance step, twirling her beneath his extended arm. "It'll take more than this to *despook* us, guys. We need a bigger dose of normal. Let's get pizza. My treat," Andrew added, because you could never tell who was apt to have cash and who wasn't; who was rich and who was pretending. Andrew was not pretending.

Ned liked how Andrew referred to "normal" as if it were a thing you could be served, or an object you could buy. It wasn't true, in Ned's experience. He'd struggled all his life to be normal and accepted. Neither experience nor money did it if you were one of the outsiders.

Ned thought very briefly of the weirdness back inside the school, and decided never to think of it again. Normal was what he wanted; he'd do anything in Night Class to get it.

"Pizza!" cried Autumn, who had never gotten pizza except with Julie-Brooke-Danielle. "Great idea! Extremely normal. But no anchovies. That's

not normal.”

“Count me in!” said Ned, who had never gotten pizza with anyone.

Andrew danced with me, thought Mariah. And tomorrow he’ll call me up, and love me, and date me, and need me, and want me. You *can* will things into being. You *can* preplan your life, and one night turn a page in your calendar and there it is: waiting: lined up: ready for you the way you were ready for it. The boy you adore.

“I’d love pizza,” said Mariah.

This will be the new group, she thought. Us. People will admire us in the halls, and wish they could be part of us, the way they used to be part of Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle.

“Settled,” said Andrew. “Anybody need a ride?”

“Me,” said Autumn.

Andrew nodded, sticking his hand in his pants pocket to fish out his keys. The keys were there, but the motion reminded him of the object that he no longer had.

He didn’t have the camcorder.

The knowledge hit him fast, without preparation. He could not remember setting the camera down. But he must have. It must be back inside. Camcorder, film, and proof were back in the building.

Proof, thought Andrew, and the hands he had thought were under complete control turned soggy and marshy with sweat, and the hot cheeks and throat iced over.

He did not want anybody to know that he, Andrew, had contributed to Mr. Phillips’s collapse. People respected Andrew. They thought he was better than other people, and Andrew prided himself on accomplishing that. I am better than other people, he thought.

Except that better people, if they ever picked on somebody, at least picked on somebody who could fight back.

Andrew, alone of the four teenagers, would see Mr. Phillips in the morning. For Mr. Phillips was subbing for Andrew's teacher, and those papers were Andrew's class's papers.

He imagined his own class finding that film. His own class playing it over and over during the forty-five minutes in which Mr. Phillips was out of control at the best of times. Andrew knew his class well. How they would laugh at Mr. Phillips, hounding him like a pack of wild dogs. Biting his tendons, bringing him down. Cheering and jeering.

He had to go back in and get the camera. His first priority was not to be exposed as the one who choreographed and filmed that, and his second priority was not to let Mr. Phillips get hurt all over again.

Andrew looked back at the school. In all their dancing, they had never looked back, never allowed their eyes to focus on the building they had just left.

He could not distinguish bricks from windows. The presence of Night Class covered his mouth and nose like Saran Wrap. Clear micro-thin plastic through which he could not breathe.

A stench like car exhaust enveloped Andrew.

But no car engine was near. Yet, he could actually see the exhaust: a grimy black soot that would stay on him even when he showered.

He had to get the camera. It took physical effort, as hard as doing that final chin-up, to look once more at the school. Nothing could be that dark. And the dark was so *occupied*. Every shadow was living, exhaling murk.

Voluntarily enter that occupied dark?

So this was how Mr. Phillips had felt the first moment Night Class invaded the library. Absolute unspeakable knowledge that he was not

alone, and that whatever had joined him was evil.

Andrew shuddered, trying to peel the suffocating plastic that didn't exist from his face.

Despooked—what a joke. The instructor, the shadows, all the other Night Classes of the world, were right there. Waiting for him. Planning how to panic him.

“Andrew?” said Mariah nervously. “What’s the matter? Do you see something? Did you hear something?”

Their backs were to the night, exposed and weak.

How close the spine is to the skin. How easily the jaws of death could crush any one of them.

It isn't death, Andrew said to himself. He fought fear. He could not dissolve like Mr. Phillips. Andrew reminded himself that he knew what was going on here: nothing but atmosphere. A Night Class did not actually do anything but channel fear.

The night was starless and moonless, and it felt as if day, should it come, would be eternally sunless.

The four teenagers moved in tight up against each other, like animals at a watering hole, hoping numbers would keep away predators. Knowing that one of them was doomed ... whoever was weakest.

I am weakest, thought Autumn.

I am weakest, thought Andrew.

I am weakest, thought Mariah.

“Where’s the camcorder?” whispered Ned.

How clearly Autumn could hear the voices of her parents. Don't get involved in this. It isn't nice, Autumn. Always do the nice thing, Autumn.

So this was blackmail. Finding out too late whose opinion mattered, and how much you did not want that opinion of you lowered. Even if she

had done nothing to hurt Mr. Phillips, it would look as if she had. “We could go back in for it,” she breathed. But I did do things, she thought.

The high school was beyond dark. It had moved into another deeper world, where eyes and ears could not matter, only souls.

“Company keeps away the dark,” whispered Autumn. “I learned that on the way in.”

“And the instructor himself said that only a person *alone* in the dark is at risk,” whispered Mariah.

How, wondered Autumn, do you schedule your life so that you are never—not once—alone in the dark?

But still, no one moved toward the building.

“We’ll have to go together,” murmured Ned. He found himself wanting to hang onto somebody. Holding hands was too girlish, too babyish.

Andrew’s eyes searched the shadows. Shadows of trees and canyon, of building and car, but most unexplained. Thick, dark shafts cast by nothing and no one.

If somebody were filming us, thought Andrew, I would look exactly like Mr. Phillips. Eyes darting, flickering, squinting, peering, screaming.

“Why bother?” said Ned loudly. “We’re not on the film. Only Mr. Phillips is. Who ever looks at home movies anyhow? Some boring footage of somebody’s kid singing off-key in a dull concert. Somebody might steal the camcorder but nobody’ll ever look at the film.”

What if Ned’s wrong, thought Mariah, and the film is not only played, but played to Mr. Phillips’s peers? The other teachers?

Teachers were viciously gossipy, and protective of turf. Subs were supposed to be second-rate. It was practically a job requirement. What if a good sub ever came along? Possibly even a sub better than the teacher?

How they would secretly rejoice, seeing the maimed rabbit that was Mr. Phillips. *We're* better than *you* are, they would singsong.

But she did not want to go back into the school, either. She wanted the minutes in the library to remain nothing but a once-seen movie. I wasn't the one who sat there nodding and swaying to the chant *alone in the dark*, Mariah reminded herself. "I think it was some kind of psychological test. We're going off the deep end over nothing. Why get so worked up? I say we drop out of class, skip the homework, forget the whole deal. Andrew can get to school early in the morning and find the camera before anybody gets to the library anyway."

Autumn felt a little chill of revulsion. For one minute, Autumn didn't like Mariah anymore. She's just protecting herself, Autumn thought. If we don't protect ourselves, who will? Autumn did not argue with Mariah. Instead she hoped Mariah would enlarge on this, be convincing, make her point correct beyond a shadow of doubt.

A shadow.

Shadows closed in.

Without speech, they knew they had to escort each other to the cars. They had to get out of there. *Now*.

Mariah's car, parked in the turnaround, was next to them. She unlocked it. Through each mind passed the new knowledge that locks are nothing. Walls are nothing. Doors are nothing.

Night Classes go where they please.

When Mariah drove away in that car, she would be one thing only: *a person alone in the dark*.

Ned made a strangled sound, small and weak, like a puppy lost in the corner. They glared at him sideways, for being the first failure in their strength, the crack through which shadows would creep.

Ned was pointing toward the school.

Autumn could not look. Ned's mouth was twisted and his eyes flared and his finger quivered. That was clue enough for Autumn.

Mariah however looked instantly, to pin it down with her eyes, assess it, and keep it meaningless.

Inside a black and empty school with no teachers, no staff, and no human occupants through the long glass windows of a classroom in which nobody stood, a movie was being played.

Andrew's movie.

The cold blue light of the screen was quite similar to the cold blue moon of the instructor's smile.

But it was not, after all, Andrew's movie.

It was somebody else's movie, and it showed Autumn and Andrew and Mariah and Ned as they watched Mr. Phillips ... and did nothing.

Chapter 7

JULIE'S PARENTS WERE OUT.

She had planned to spend the night on the phone. Phones were lifelines, and as long as the other person's voice came through the wire, you were still safe. Brooke, however, had a choir rehearsal (she was the only member of the group with a singing voice) and Danielle was going out to dinner to meet her newest future stepfather. (She was the only member of the group whose parents held annual weddings; marriage was sort of their hobby, and every now and then they even remarried each other. Danielle remained normal.) However, Autumn should have been home.

Julie needed Autumn to be home.

Julie was hurting. When she left school that afternoon, getting into her Mercedes (Julie was the richest of the group and liked it to be very clear), a girl named Linnie, somebody for whom Julie certainly had no use and certainly would never bother with, had said, "Hi, piranha."

The girls around Julie had snickered. "She's beyond piranha," said another girl. "She's a piranha trainer."

Linnie said, "Don't get in the water with Julie," and Linnie and her friends laughed together and walked away from Julie.

Normally Julie liked her reputation as the toughest and cruellest in school. Today, however, she had caught herself in a mood of envy. First she was envious of Sal, who had the unusual quality of being good at being alone. Then she was envious of Mariah, who probably had the unusual quality of being happy in her dreams.

And me, thought Julie, what unusual qualities do I have? It isn't unusual for teenagers to be mean to each other. It isn't unusual for

teenagers to be well dressed and drive great cars.

Julie wanted to talk to Autumn and had even considered the possibility of laying her heart bare. Although they were inseparable, Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle told each other very little; it was too risky, maybe because they were inseparable.

But Autumn had gone out somewhere, without letting Julie know, and Julie was home alone, with nobody to talk to. She imagined herself calling Sal up, or Mariah, or Linnie.

Yeah, right.

Julie was afraid of the dark. Every night of her life, she still checked under the bed. Kept the closet door closed. Had the yardman trim the branches away from the house so nothing rasped against the siding. She still went to bed before her Mom and Dad so that she'd never be the one to turn off the last light.

Julie had slept with a night-light since birth. Her end of the house actually had three night-lights: bedroom, hall, and bathroom. She was a big buyer of night-lights, which you could find in catalogs. She had bunny rabbit night-lights, Christmas night-lights, moon-and-stars night-lights, and Mickey Mouse night-lights.

They had not helped Julie like the dark. They had only taught her that collecting was fun. Whenever Brooke-Autumn-Danielle spent the night, Julie liked to pretend that her grandmother was the night-light freak. I don't spoil her fun, Julie explained generously, I let her think the night-lights are really sweet.

They weren't sweet.

They were essential.

What would she do if the electricity went off? What would she do if Mom and Dad were very, very late? What would she do if there were a

prowler, or a strange car in the drive, or a creepy noise from the roof, or footsteps on the stairs?

Julie was afraid to shampoo her hair, lest she be blind and helpless in the dark. She could not have the television off, but she could not have the sound on, either; it would mask whatever sounds in the dark Julie needed to be alert for. She could not go to bed, because there she was cornered, but she could not stay up, because there she was exposed.

She could not laugh at herself, she could not calm herself, she could only wait for her parents to return, and in the meantime she focused herself on Autumn, whose fault this was; if Autumn were home the way she had been told, Julie would have a voice on the line and all would be well.

“We were shadows!” cried Autumn. “How did it film us? We couldn’t even see each other when it happened.” She wanted to get sick, right there on the sidewalk. For her face, the feminine but strong looks of which she was so proud, had observed Mr. Phillips like a scientist observing a rat in a maze. With a little superior smile she had turned off his only light, and raised her eyebrows in contempt when Mr. Phillips screamed.

Nothing good of Autumn showed in that film. Only the lowest part of her: the scummy part.

I didn’t know I had scummy parts, thought Autumn. I didn’t mean to be mean! It isn’t fair that somebody was filming. I would have behaved right if I’d known anybody could see me.

“Who shot that footage?” said Andrew. “Nobody else was there. Just us. And the instructor. And Mr. Phillips.”

Somebody is always there, said the instructor.

His coal smoke shadow blinded their eyes.

“Go away!” screamed Mariah. “If you have to come out here, come like a person! Talk out loud!”

The instructor explained that Mariah was not in charge here. *Night Classes*, he said, *begin continually. And graduates, of course, entertain themselves. As all of you agreed, over and over, as I am more than willing to show you on film, taunting Mr. Phillips was excellent entertainment.*

Autumn was going to throw up. She could tell. It was not going to be spooky or shadowy, it was going to be gross and awful.

Past students are always in the shadows. Waiting to see who presents himself as an SC. I have been most interested in your own fear of becoming SCs.

“Well, we’re going in there to get our camcorder!” shouted Mariah Frederick, astonishing everybody, especially herself. “You’re nothing but a punk! You’re nothing but smoke and shadow and stench!”

Andrew loved her. Now when she was righteous and angry and storming, he wanted to film her.

“We’re getting our film and we’re getting your film and we’re dropping out of class. So there!” Mariah Frederick marched toward the high school door, and her classmates fell in line behind her.

Lead, thought Andrew, and there will be followers. He was amazed to be Mariah’s follower.

And brother Bevin? said the instructor.

Bevin could not imagine what his life would be without the radio. He especially liked call-in shows, and he knew that the people who called in were like himself: desperate, lonely grieving people without lives. People who at midnight and two in the morning still needed to hear the voices of others, talking of nothing, offering opinions based on nothing, just talking, talking, talking to shut out the loneliness.

Bevin himself had never called in. He regarded the phone as something that must be kept for the final resort; the ultimate call for help. The radio was his friend, but the phone might someday be the only way out.

The only way out of what?

Bevin never permitted himself actually to have the thoughts he was having. His thoughts were cordoned off, like parts of a vast auditorium where even he himself could not go. He could only see them across the room, vaguely, and out of focus. Thoughts of peace or death or disappearance. Sometimes these three thoughts seemed like the same thing and sometimes, then, they seemed quite wonderful.

Tonight they seemed terrible.

His sister was taking some sort of class with her friends, undoubtedly going out for pizza afterward, dancing perhaps; laughing, certainly. Mariah had so many friends! People were always smiling at her, saying hello to her. Bevin did not know how she did it. On Mariah that bewildered dreamy look was very attractive, and people loved her for it, and forgave her when she lost the thread of conversations, and welcomed her even when all six seats at a six-chair lunch table were full.

But Bevin, who was so similar to Mariah; who not only looked a great deal like her but acted and moved like her; Bevin was loathed for it.

He had never been jealous of Mariah. In fact Bevin had had very few harsh emotions toward others in his life. Perhaps that was part of the problem; perhaps he was essentially so wimpy that he was not worthy of notice.

But there, of course, was the problem.

Bevin, who until last year had been not worthy of notice, was this year's choice for notice.

Choice. It was a terrible word. You spent your life aching to be chosen ... and then you were.

The school was full of gangs. Some wore colors, and carried knives or guns, and their jackets broadcast their names. This was not the sort of gang that bothered Bevin.

The gangs that went after Bevin were more respectable. Like the group in math: Kevin, Cody, and Casey. They entertained themselves by shoving him, mimicking him, destroying his papers, kicking in his locker, and spitting on him.

The math teacher knew. Invariably, the math teacher would manage to turn his back just as Kevin, Cody, and Casey were going to do something. When the boys were done, the math teacher would face them again.

Smiling.

Every night, in despair, Bevin analyzed himself.

What is wrong with me? How do I correct it?

That was last year, that struggle to correct.

This year, he did not try to figure out what was wrong with him. He knew with the certainty of a stone falling that he would hit the earth one day, and be destroyed. It was simply a matter of time.

Bevin, locked into loneliness, knew that time was running out for him.

Mariah slowed down.

Remotely Andrew remembered Mariah's brother, Bevin. A lower life form, really. One of those losers who never even tried to find a seat in the cafeteria; nobody wanted him, and it was better to press up against the wall, using the cement blocks for company. An ETS if I've ever seen one, thought Andrew.

An ETS if I've ever seen one, said the instructor. Shall I assign Bevin to someone?

Bevin is home alone, thought Mariah. Alone in the dark.

"We need the film," whispered Autumn. She had managed not to get sick. Now the point was getting that film and destroying it so that people who mattered, like her mother and father, would never see it. "Mr. Phillips was a good subject," she said quickly, placating the instructor, "but there's no need to repeat him. He's used now. So we need the film."

The instructor laughed. It was like a storm coming, a distant roll of thunder and a faint crack of lightning.

Autumn, are you thinking of your mother and your father? Your mother and your father have always been proud of how responsible and thoughtful you are. Are you worried that they might not want to watch this film? The one that shows how you revelled in the SC your friend Mariah so generously offered us?

How would he show it to them? thought Autumn. Would it just start playing on the TV screen? Would it show on the windowpane one night when they were home alone in the dark? Would it come in the mail, or just appear on the shelf next to the VCR?

Ned said, "Come on, give us a break. Keep the film on Mr. Phillips, but give us back the one that shows us. Nobody's parents want to see that."

We've given up Mr. Phillips, thought Andrew. We're saving ourselves, except for Mariah, who is saving Bevin.

Ah, but the party, said the instructor. How could you have forgotten our party? Refreshments in the dark. Movies. Graduation. We will be showing the film then. Who knows whom we might invite for that?

Andrew bluffed. "We're not staying in class, so there won't be any graduation party, so there."

At the risk of repeating myself too often, may I remind you that there is no dropping out. Now remember what counts, said the instructor. Pizza and normalcy, as I recall, were your list. You are safe, by the way. Students are not SCs. You may be quite comfortable alone in the dark. It is only those around you who are at risk. Those who wrongly trusted you.

The shadows moved.

Where it had been pitch-black, it was now merely gray.

The instructor was leaving.

His reminder was barely a crackle of palm leaves.

Don't forget your homework, he said.

Mariah and Autumn, who had ridden over together in Mariah's car, rushed inside the restaurant like explorers coming in out of the arctic snow. They fell on each other, in the safe, silly companionship of sisterhood.

Ned and Andrew, coming in after them, carefully avoided any such thing. But when Autumn and Mariah stepped back from each other, all four laughed the wild, giddy laughter of getting through something together. It was the laugh of survivors.

But did we survive? thought Autumn. I guess I don't want to think about it. I have enough problems already.

This was a lie. Autumn had very few problems. Certainly no girl in the high school would ever have considered Autumn's problems real, and Autumn knew it.

Autumn moved quickly toward pizza and normalcy. "What a little night class can do to a person! I feel sure that tomato sauce and mozzarella will solve it."

Grabbing Ned's and Mariah's hands, Autumn dragged them toward a good booth. Andrew, who was holding Mariah's other hand, was last in

line. That seemed reasonable. He had certainly stood last in line out there in the shadows.

“Extra cheese!” said Mariah.

“No anchovies,” Ned reminded them. He hoped Autumn would give him points for remembering that she was anti-anchovy. Autumn had slid into the booth first, against the wall, and Ned, as daring as a man scaling a cliff, sat next to her. To his amazement, she smiled. It was a real smile. A friendship smile. A yes-I’m-glad-you’re-here smile.

He knew better than to believe for a fraction of a second that Autumn *liked* him, as in wanting to date, but she liked him, and that alone went beyond Ned’s wildest dreams.

What was Night Class? he thought. I don’t even know what I think about what I thought back there, let alone what I think really happened. *If* anything really happened.

Ned had been incredibly scared in the car driving here. He didn’t care how many reassurances the instructor had given, the fact was that the world was full of Night Classes, searching for an ETS, and Ned was afraid he was as obvious as Bevin.

I don’t want to be an Easy To Scare, he thought. I want to be a Tough To Scare, or even an Impossible To Scare.

He decided to believe that he’d been afraid of the girls. To make up for it, he grinned widely at Autumn, who was busy with the menu, and Mariah, who was busy with Andrew.

Deep wrinkles crossed faded skin dotted with brown age spots. Wrists and ankles sagged as if filled with sloshing water. Eyes didn’t focus well anymore and thin white hair stood up like a baby’s after a nap.

She was somebody’s grandmother, although her family lived across the country and hadn’t seen her in several years.

She was close to a century old and looked more. She couldn't drive anymore, her hands were too arthritic to curl safely around a steering wheel.

Luckily Mrs. Deale lived near a main street with several little strip malls. She could walk (or on arthritic days, totter) down to get her groceries, her prescriptions, and her cup of coffee. She loved the diner. It was toasty inside (Mrs. Deale couldn't get warm in summer anymore, never mind winter) and waitresses would call her by name and remember that she liked her English muffin dry, with strawberry jam.

How much lonelier the little house seemed after the chatter and gossip of acquaintances. How much quieter the empty rooms. How much longer the shadows of evening.

Mrs. Deale had begun thinking about shadows lately. When she looked directly at a shadow, it was nothing but dark space. But when the shadow was at the side, and she saw it through the corners of her eyes, the shadows had life and were springing toward her.

She had begun leaving the television on all the time.

They were her friends: those television people. She loved morning news shows and quizzes, soaps and nature shows, and basketball games and car races.

But beyond the television, in the other three rooms of her little house, the emptiness lay there like something waiting. The darkness had changed character, and sometimes it seemed even to have a smell of its own, as if her house desperately needed cleaning.

Mrs. Deale used to tour the house, checking locks and windows and drapes, feeling secure. Now she just sat tight in the little living room with the little TV, hoping she would be all right.

It was such a wicked world. Gangs and wildings and hooligans.

And loneliness.

Such loneliness.

Around Mrs. Deale, the dark was an evil stranger, testing the doors ... plucking at the window locks ... eager to sneak in ... and get her.

Andrew didn't bother with the menu. "Does anybody besides me want onions, peppers, sausage, hamburger, pepperoni, olives—"

"Yes, everybody besides you wants everything," said Autumn.

"Except anchovies," said Ned again.

Andrew ordered a pitcher of Coke and an extra large pizza, with everything except anchovies. He was drenched with relief. The film would not be in school. He didn't have to worry about Mr. Phillips. The instructor was saving it for the party. I'll figure out a way to deal with the party when the time comes, Andrew told himself, with the assurance of a superkid, who always manages to pull it off when the time comes.

He turned to Mariah. He was good at meaningless flirting. He tucked her hair lightly behind her ear, and with the same finger, pretended to adjust a tangled earring. "You look lovely tonight," he said.

Mariah tilted ever so slightly against him, and he smiled, though not directly at her, and leaned toward her.

My homework, he thought. I have math and English to do. As for choosing an ETS, I don't have to do that till next Wednesday. Maybe it'll all go away by then. ETS. It doesn't sound so bad abbreviated. As long as I think of it by its initials, I could choose one. It isn't a person, just an ETS.

"By the way, who is Bevin?" Autumn asked Mariah, as if she were asking something ordinary.

"My brother," said Mariah, sitting up, leaving the sweet warmth of Andrew's arm. How to describe Bevin to a girl like Autumn? Autumn who had never once in her life lacked best friends and ringing phones and

company for everything. She studied the other three teenagers in the pizza booth. Homework. Would Autumn or Andrew or Ned pick my brother? Am I among Bevin's enemies?

"He's a person without friends," said Mariah at last.

"What a horrible description!" cried Autumn. "There must be something else to say about him! He must be good at something, or he loves something, or he works incredibly hard on something."

No, thought Mariah, it defines Bevin completely. He is a person without friends.

Andrew felt the distance between himself and Mariah as worlds; glaciers. He wanted her back, leaning on him. He wanted to offer to be Bevin's friend. But Bevin might not be interested. He might be so conditioned to pain that he'd assume Andrew had some unpleasant motive.

And what if Bevin took Andrew up on it?

I'd have to adopt him, thought Andrew. He saw Bevin then as a great burden: a heavy depressing thing to carry around.

So he offered nothing, but hoped the pizza would arrive soon and give them something better to discuss.

Autumn was more observant than the rest because she was accustomed to watching her usual companions so closely. Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle were very demanding of each other. It was essential to watch, calculate, plan, analyze. They were no ordinary foursome; they must always be impressive to outsiders.

Autumn knew that the last thing anybody wanted to talk about was Night Class, and she also knew that they wanted to talk of nothing but Night Class. She was the giver and the peacemaker in Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle. She would give and make here, too. She'd supply the opening; they could pick up the subject if they wanted.

“Next Wednesday,” said Autumn, “let’s carpool. It’s the fashionable, politically correct thing to carpool, and I personally never have. Let’s go together to Night Class.”

Ned had never carpooled, either. Nor met anyone who did. Tree-hugging, Doc Martens-wearing, granola-crunching people believed in carpooling, but naturally, for somebody else, not them. Everybody Ned knew loved being alone in a car as much as Ned did. “I’ll drive,” said Ned eagerly. Either his mother’s Volvo or his father’s Suburban would be perfect. Roomy with a great sound system.

The pizza arrived.

Nobody had to answer quite yet. They could exclaim over how wonderful it looked, how hot and yummy and tasty it would be.

For two things had come to four minds.

If they carpooled, that meant they were going again to night school, and would be doing their homework, choosing an ETS like Bevin.

And if Ned drove, they would have to admit they hung out with such a loser, even accepted rides with him, the ultimate display of comradeship.

That’s what this is about, thought Autumn clearly. The winners and the losers. You always have to be sure you’re in the right camp. I’m a winner. I can’t risk it.

“Is everything all right?” said the waiter. He meant the pizza.

But of course, no matter how yummy the pizza might be, nothing was all right.

Chapter 8

“BEVIN?” CALLED MARIAH.

Every single light in the house was on.

She began turning them off. Her parents were also big on saving electricity and would not care for this waste of bulb and wattage. “Bevin?”

She felt wonderful. Andrew had driven behind her to be sure she was never alone on the way home. How fascinating it was, the division between daydream Andrew and the real Andrew. Real Andrew was less sure of himself. Less predictable. She lost him to his thoughts throughout the evening, and he had a habit of rubbing his jaw that she had never noticed in school, or had him do in her secret life with him. He ate pizza much more voraciously than she’d expected, wolfing down half a wedge in a single mouthful and laughing through cheese and tomato.

She had a nice warm sense of being able to shelve the pretend Andrew. Setting that Andrew aside, and moving on in the world to real Andrews, real dates, real kisses. He had not kissed her. But he had waved good-bye when she got out of her car, and waited patiently for her to unlock her own front door, and get in, and wave back that she was safe.

Mariah turned off living room lights, dining room lights, kitchen lights. “Bevin, where are you?”

How loud her footsteps seemed, suddenly, in the empty dark.

How vacant her voice.

Bevin? she said, but her throat constricted, and nothing came out: Only the word hung there, as their words in Night Class had hung.

Where was Bevin?

When she found him, what would she find?

Screaming, she ran through the rest of the house, pounding up the stairs, flinging open the doors. “Bevin! Where are you?”

He was in the upstairs TV room, the little cozy game room that brother and sister shared. He was wrapped in blankets, staring at the screen. The television was off.

The lights were on.

The room was an incredible mess, as if an earthquake had struck, with the epicenter beneath the coffee table. Books and papers and magazines and objects and pillows and even the shelves themselves were flung on the floor.

Bevin’s eyes were open but saw nothing. His skin was faintly green, as if he were one enormous advancing bruise. “Don’t be dead, Bevin,” she whispered. “What’s the matter? What’s wrong? Wake up, Bevin. Bevin!”

He was alive.

A little color came back into his face, but he just looked more bruised. He did not make a sound.

“What happened, Bevin?” She was screaming now.

He shook his head and said nothing.

“Who made this mess?”

The scream vanished into a whisper. She knew who had made this mess. Mariah, still gripping his shoulder with tight fingers, sank away from him. Another Night Class had been here. *An ETS if there ever was one.* She had trusted the instructor to keep his word—but—but, wait. He had made no promises. He only asked if she wanted Bevin to be an SC. He had never said that Bevin wouldn’t be.

Slowly, dazedly, Bevin shook his head in the direction of his sister. He said nothing. He did not look as if he possessed words any longer, speech driven out of him, like sanity from Mr. Phillips.

Mariah began to clean up. She did not want their parents to see this. There was something evil and horrid about the extent of the damage, and the way it was confined to this one room. Bevin had gone into a frenzy, destroying everything within reach.

She was suddenly terribly angry with him for being weak. “Did you do this?” she snapped. It was his own fault, being so pathetic. Why couldn’t he get his act together like a normal human being? Why couldn’t she have a brother like Andrew or a sister like Autumn? Why was she stuck with an ETS like Bevin?

She set the shelves back on their supports and stacked magazines back on their ledges. She repositioned the row of her horseback riding trophies and her swim team medals and her souvenirs from trips to Texas and Florida, and the photographs of herself ...

There was nothing of Bevin here.

Not one thing.

It was a room that belonged to both of them, and in it, he had no trophies, no souvenirs, no reminders, no precious little pieces of things.

She had the eerie awful thought that perhaps there was nothing of Bevin anywhere. Perhaps Bevin himself had dematerialized. Months or even years ago, had Bevin begun taking up less and less room until he took none at all? Merely occupied a seat in the house of others?

“Oh, Bevin,” she said, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Listen, well do better. Well—well—” She had no idea what she was talking about, only that she wanted Bevin to have a better life and be a happier person. To be a person at all. “I’m home now. Everything’s okay.”

Bevin almost smiled, but not at her. At her idea that everything could possibly be okay.

She sat down to pat him, although he was far too old for patting, and long beyond the stage where a pat would make everything better.

And her brother, her beloved sad brother, stiffened, and pulled away from her in a sort of shock and stared at her with new eyes.

He sees, thought Mariah Frederick. He sees it on me. It stuck to me. Night school and what we did to Mr. Phillips. He can tell.

Mariah backed away from the accusation in her brother's eyes. Quickly she finished picking up the room. Straightened everything. Got the little hand vacuum and did the carpet. It looked better than it had in ages.

But I'm not better, thought Mariah. I'm worse. Night Class stuck to me like the smell of cigarettes. Bevin knows.

Bevin found it quite amazing that his sister could ask if he had made this mess. Nobody else lived here! Nobody else had been home. How could Mariah ask if some other person had created this nightmare?

It never failed to shock Bevin how little people noticed of his, Bevin's, existence. And here he had gone ballistic, breaking every representation of their lives, as a prelude, or maybe a blockade, to destroying his actual life, and Mariah was vacuuming. Dusting. Hiding it, so their parents would never see.

Bevin realized that more than anything else, he had wanted Mariah to see. To climb out of that odd, drifty, dreamy world of hers and notice the real one that he and only he was forced to occupy.

To rescue him, somehow.

To read in the cracked and broken debris of their possessions how cracked and broken he was.

In the morning, the sun was clear gold in a joyful blue heaven. It was a day where windows were rectangles of glory, while prisms of excited sunshine darted across rooms. It was a day of California colors. Hot and energetic and friendly.

Nothing could go wrong on such a day.

No earth could quake, no mud could slide, no forest could fire up, and no Night Class was worth remembering.

Mariah was delirious with happiness. Her head spun, her mind in a fever, her thoughts frivolous.

Andrew liked her.

Andrew had touched her. Spoken to her. Laughed with her. Enjoyed her company ... and wanted more.

What else did life hold? The boy she had adored was going to adore her back. And Mariah was ready.

It was even the kind of day in which the right clothing leaps off the hanger onto your body, so you are perfectly dressed in just the right way, with no effort and no stewing and no second guesses.

Mariah went to school thinking Andrew, Andrew, Andrew.

Julie got up slowly. Even though she never wanted to go to bed at night, she never wanted to get out of bed in the morning, either. The wonderful weight of her blankets was like friendship. And her pillows were precious to her, one fat and fluffy, the other hard and narrow, so she slept with two different personalities. And her old dolls that she had never really wanted to give up, lying in their pretty doll crib in their perfect clothes, their hair never mussed and their white aprons always neat. And in sunshine, the night-lights were, as she pretended, rather sweet.

Julie put on her makeup and the same thing that happened every morning in front of the mirror happened again. A snide sneer locked into

place. Nobody could curl a lip in contempt as well as Julie.

But she was seventeen now, not twelve, and the cruelty in her face was not what she wanted. The sarcasm that poured out of her mouth was not what she meant to say.

Julie thought constantly of college. She would go far, far away, and never again know anybody from this high school where she had been so mean, so often. She would sling away this bullying she did, and make it history. In her college world, she'd be like Sal or Mariah, and always be nice and beloved of everybody.

Every morning, Julie planned to stop being mean, but instead, every day, she got meaner, and better at being mean.

Stop it! Julie would tell herself, and then immediately she'd do something cruel.

It was sort of like a fat kid swearing every morning of her life to go on a diet, and then ruining it before lunch.

Julie often watched Sal. Sal was the only truly self-sufficient girl in high school. It was Mariah who rushed over to Sal, not Sal who rushed over to Mariah. Sal's mouth was always turned up in a smile, her eyes bright, and her interest visible. Sal seemed satisfied with herself and her life, and therefore, of course, she drew Tommy, the only truly self-sufficient boy in high school.

Julie had always wanted Tommy to like her.

It wasn't going to happen. Tommy invariably was standing there when Julie was at her dog-bite worst.

Julie thought of yearbook categories. Andrew and Autumn would certainly get Most Likely To Succeed. Mariah would be a whole new category—Class Daydreamer. Tommy would be Most Liked. She, Julie, would undoubtedly be voted Class Witch.

And now Autumn was moving off on her own.

Julie had a vision of her three friends peeling off like skaters on Crack the Whip.

What does it matter? We aren't friends, thought Julie. We're a gang. We're girls and we're beautiful and rich, and we get good grades and we don't even smoke cigarettes, never mind commit street crimes. But we're a gang. We gang up on people.

They're going to leave me, one by one, and I'll be alone.

Alone in the dark, thought Julie, and it seemed to her that the little crescent moon night-light turned blue and evil and smirked at her, and planned what it would do to her, alone in the dark.

Autumn usually conferred with Julie-Brooke-Danielle so as to dress somewhat alike. (They did not actually have matching outfits; that would have been pitiful. Sophisticated young women acting like hospital quadruplets getting free Pampers.) But they liked to have a theme. The theme might be color: tartan, or black, or lime green. The theme might be texture: denim or velvet or gauze. The theme might be elegant or sloppy. (Autumn did not participate in sloppy, whereas Brooke revelled in it; Brooke in turn did not participate in elegant; this was a little statement Brooke liked to make showing what an individual she was.)

Autumn, too, woke in a great mood, flinging open the drapes on a yard filled with color: emerald-green grass toasting in gold sun reflecting off the pink stucco house. She missed Julie-Brooke-Danielle. Twenty-four hours since they had conversed! There was so much to discuss.

At school, she tumbled out of her mother's car and rushed into the lobby. Julie-Brooke-Danielle were waiting for her. They were standing in a row like executioners, stern and angry. As if Autumn were to be punished for a day off from their company. "Hi!" she cried gaily.

They did not smile back.

“Ned chatted with us this morning,” said Julie. Julie’s green eyes, intensified by green contact lenses, looked opaque and inhuman.

“Ned told us you and he had pizza together last night,” said Brooke, and Brooke laughed, genuinely amused and pitying. “I mean, really, Autumn. With boys around who have something to offer, like Kevin or Cody, you pick *Ned*?”

Now the three burst into a shower of giggles, like spring rain.

“No wonder you didn’t tell us about your little date.” Danielle shook her head. Her hair didn’t move along with her head. It was so starched, so sprayed, it remained stationary even when Danielle shifted. “I mean, Autumn, Ned is truly the bottom. He’ll never be anything else, either. He doesn’t even have potential.”

“What is he?” asked Julie. “Your little learning experience?”

Autumn was hot with shame. She was angry with Ned, pretending that anything had happened besides four kids getting a snack after class. She was angry with Ned for being the low-level pathetic thing they correctly described.

“You’re not going out with him again, are you? He says you are.” The trill of Julie’s laughter stretched down halls for the entire school to listen in on. “I mean, Autumn. There’s a world out there, and you *pick Ned*?”

“I didn’t pick Ned,” said Autumn sharply. “I didn’t do anything with Ned. He was just there. He doesn’t count.”

“Hi, Mariah!” called Sal, scampering over. She ran like a four-year-old, half hopping, half skipping, all happy.

Mariah loved her.

“How was your night class?” Sal asked. There were no capital letters the way Sal said it, it was ordinary, it was nothing, and Mariah repeated

that to herself: night class was nothing. “Oh, dumb,” she said breezily, “but nice people. Andrew and Autumn and Ned.”

“Is Ned nice?” Sal looked pleased with this information. “I always thought he might be, but of course you never have any clues with that kind of person.”

“And Autumn,” added Mariah quickly, not wanting Sal to ask her what Night Class was about, “is very nice, too.”

Sal twinkled at her best friend. “And Andrew? I presume Andrew is perfection itself?”

Mariah blushed and nodded.

“I’ll bet you don’t even know what the class is about,” teased Sal. “I’ll bet you’re just sitting there feasting your eyes on old Andrew.”

Mariah nodded, but she felt like a jar with a leak. All her secrets were pouring out. Or maybe she had never had secrets. Maybe when she had her private dialogues with Andrew, her lips had moved, and everybody read her lips and knew she was pretending Andrew was there to answer.

“Hi, Sal,” said Tommy. “Hi, Mariah. So how was your class, Mariah? What did it turn out to be?”

“Andrew worship,” said Sal, giggling.

Tommy’s smile shrugged that off, mere teasing based on nothing. “But is there a textbook? Is there homework? Is there even a subject?”

Mariah knew that if she gave a single thought to homework, if she allowed the memory of the subject into her head, it would kill the sunshine. The thing was to blockade such a thought. And who was more greatly skilled than Mariah Frederick at blocking thoughts and creating new ones?

“Class is nothing but preparation for pizza afterward,” said Mariah. “Next week we’re going to carpool, probably have pizza before class, too.”

What a peaceful smile Tommy had, all comfort and pleasantness. A slow smile, not superior and taunting like Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle, not nervous like Ned, nor bubbly and unbottled like Sal. A guy who knew what his world was and liked it.

Why have I had a crush only on Andrew? Mariah thought suddenly. Why haven't I ever even noticed other boys?

The thought was so disloyal she crushed it immediately.

But how can it be disloyal to Andrew, she thought, when Andrew never even participated? The only thing it's disloyal to is my own imagination.

"Hmmm," said Sal. "Thirty-second time lag here. Maybe the topic really is Andrew, Tommy."

Both Sal and Tommy smiled at her now, and there was an overlapping quality to their smiles. Then, equally overlapping, they walked off together.

They had walked places together before. Their stride matched. The way they tilted their heads toward each other matched.

They liked each other.

How normal they looked. Ordinary friends, not touching, simply enjoying each other's presence. No overwhelming half-crazed crushes here. No secret lives.

Either I'll have a normal friendly friendship with Andrew, thought Mariah, or I'll skip it. No more secret lives. I want to be content and easy and popular like Tommy and Sal.

Andrew had meant to arrive early, and search for the camcorder and erase the tape. But somehow when he woke up, it didn't have much importance and he didn't rush and now was actually in danger of arriving late.

Nothing, Andrew reassured himself, had happened last night. He decided to be amused instead of worried. He pondered the correct verb for what had happened to their bodies. Had they shadowed themselves? Smoked themselves? Disembodied themselves?

He found himself smiling. They had merely happened upon a teacher who, nervous in the dark, had gone home.

And yet when he parked, Andrew could not help checking the teachers' lot for Mr. Phillips's car. Mr. Phillips drove a car quite similar to himself: a dull, mustard-yellow, twelve-year-old Dodge, which had not had character when it was built, and was not gathering character as it aged.

The Dodge was not in the parking lot.

Andrew did not know whether to be relieved. He did not want to deal with Mr. Phillips, and yet he wanted to know that Mr. Phillips was all right.

Of course he's all right, thought Andrew irritably. Nothing happened to make him otherwise.

Andrew got into his first period class moments before the late bell, and there was the principal, taking attendance. Andrew raised his eyebrows. "Mr. Phillips did not show up," said the principal, clearly furious. "He did not even have the courtesy to call. Really. Substitutes think they will get permanent jobs in the system, but when they behave irresponsibly, how could they possibly imagine they would be asked back? Andrew, help me run this class. What chapter are you on?"

Andrew helped run the class.

He said to himself, Nothing happened. If Mr. Phillips didn't show up it isn't because he was scared to death and had a heart attack, it's because—because—

Nothing happened, Andrew told himself again. Certainly nothing that I did.

Bevin made a decision he had never made before.

He gave up.

Always, even at the worst of times, Bevin had hung on. He had pressed up against a wall or a desk or a corner and somehow the pressure against his back gave him the strength to keep going.

But not today.

Today absolutely nothing happened, and yet the eyes and the plans of the bullies of the school were all over him, gauging him, taking his measure, weakening him with their laughter, leaving him ready for his attackers.

He walked out of the school, and found he could walk the distance home quite easily. During the walk there was only nature, which had no interest in him, and passing traffic, which had less.

Inside the house, he did not even turn on the radio.

He had the sense that the station would no longer tune in for his ears; that he had lost his only lifeline.

He was down to only two choices now: death or disappearance.

“Oh, hi, Andrew,” said the principal.

Andrew had been hanging around hoping to run into Mariah. She was usually everywhere. Where had she gone this time? “Hi, sir,” he said to the principal, “how are you.” It wasn’t a question, because Andrew didn’t actually care how the principal was.

“I’m lousy. Listen, remember I told you Mr. Phillips didn’t show up and didn’t even bother to call? I need to retract that. It wasn’t fair of me. Poor guy was correcting papers here in the library and had some sort of

mental breakdown on his way home. Police found him just sitting in his car by the side of the road at two o'clock this morning. He's been hospitalized."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said Andrew. Andrew was more than sorry. He was horrified. "What hospital?" said Andrew numbly. "I'd better visit him."

"Andrew, what a great kid you are!" said the principal, sounding far too surprised, as if he'd had his doubts about Andrew.

When the school day ended, the morning scenes occurred in the reverse, like a daily film running backward. There were Mariah and Andrew standing by the bulletin board, noticing that the Night Class sheet was gone. There was Ned, wall-clinging, inching toward them.

And there were Tommy and Sal, still not touching, still very fond of each other, still walking purposefully. A definite, very enviable pair.

Autumn said quietly, "Neither of them would ever be an ETS."

Mariah practically leaped out of her shoes.

"I didn't mean to startle you," said Autumn. "I thought you saw me coming."

Mariah shook her head. How dare Autumn mention the ETS? It brought Mariah's nerves too close to the surface, as if the slightest sun or windburn would expose her fears.

"Sal and Tommy are strong," said Autumn. "I felt it all the way down the hall. You don't choose the strong one for your ETS, you choose the weak. It would be like a lion picking a lion or a leopard picking a leopard, to pick Sal or Tommy."

"Autumn, are you going to do it?" whispered Mariah. "Are you really going to choose an ETS?"

“The teacher said there’s no dropping out, Mariah, I don’t want to face that teacher without my homework done.”

“I’m dropping out anyway,” said Mariah. “It’s okay for lions and leopards to choose victims, but it isn’t okay for us. We wouldn’t be doing it to survive. We’d be doing it to ... to ...”

“To scare them,” said Andrew.

“Are you going to do your homework, Andrew?” Mariah’s voice was below whisper. It was hardly even breath.

Andrew whispered, “There’s some old lady that lives down the road from us. She’s half gonzo. She doesn’t ever remember anyone’s name, she just waves and waves like her wrist is stuck. She lives alone.”

Mariah was horrified. A neighbor of his? Some peaceful old confused lady, and Andrew had chosen her for his ETS?

“Have you done your homework, Mariah?” breathed Andrew.

Mariah twitched.

“Well, well, well,” said Julie-Brooke-Danielle. “What homework are we talking about?”

Autumn flinched. The minute she was with her three dearest friends she felt like less of a person.

Julie said, “What did you and Autumn do in that class, anyway, Mariah?”

“Nothing,” said Mariah quickly. Much too quickly.

Julie’s sharp green eyes sharpened.

She’s creepy, thought Mariah. But who am I to call another person creepy? I who have secret crushes that last for years and years? I who go to Night Class and offer up Scare Choices?

“Autumn won’t talk about it,” said Julie. “I mean, she won’t even tell me the subject.”

“There is no subject,” said Mariah.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” snapped Julie. “It’s night school. Of course there’s a subject. You can’t just go there and sit around and pick on each other.”

The word “pick” penetrated minds as if it were itself a pick: an ice pick, an iron-ore pick.

Who would Mariah pick? Who would Andrew pick?

Who would pick Bevin?

Or had somebody already picked Bevin?

“What is that Night Class?” said Danielle. “What’s the subject anyhow? Photography? Filming?”

Andrew went white. “Why do you say that?” he asked.

“I can’t think of anything else I’d be willing to come back to school for at night,” said Danielle. “I want to go into film, of course. Not acting; actors are pathetic dweebs without lives. I want to be a producer. What was your film about, Andrew?”

“It was about fear,” said Andrew.

“Great topic!” said Julie. “Don’t you love scary, scary movies? By the way, here’s something really scary. Autumn is dating Ned.” Julie-Brooke-Danielle burst into hysterical laughter. “Ned!” they repeated.

Julie, now, would be fun to scare, Autumn realized. Unlike Mr. Phillips, Julie would deserve it. How many people had Julie scorned and loathed publicly over the years? How many people had Julie crushed under her foot, socially speaking? How many people had Julie laughed at?

Mariah quickly defended Autumn against the terrible charge of dating Ned. “It wasn’t a date. It was just class. We had pizza afterward. Everybody went. You couldn’t call it anything.”

Too late Mariah saw that Ned had joined them. Of course Ned had joined them, because Ned had thought it was something. Not a date, of course, but his own group.

Ned, white and hurt, stood very still, trying to be wallpaper, but Julie-Brooke-Danielle noticed him and threw back their heads laughing. “Hi, Neddie,” said Julie. She raised her eyebrows and shook her head, totally entertained. She hooked her finger in Ned’s shirt pocket and moved him forward by his fabric. She regarded his face with her best mixture of contempt and laughter. With her fingernail only, not even touching his skin with her skin, she adjusted the angle of his profile. “Cute choice, Autumn,” she said, meaning, Pathetic choice, Autumn.

Julie-Brooke-Danielle left laughing.

Ned was desperate to leave, to be anywhere but there, standing knee-deep in humiliation. He knew from experience not to walk off, because laughter would follow him. It was better just to stand still, until the tormentors abandoned him. He would be forgotten as soon as they faced the other direction and went on with their lives.

How he had hoped that he would actually have these three as friends! How many times would he fall for it—that soaring giddy hope which led to public pain? It was stupid to have hope.

The voices of Night Class whispered in the halls. Dark voices, which had stood in dark buildings and considered dark homework.

“We could film Julie,” said Autumn. “It would be a good film, and Julie would deserve it. She isn’t a nice person.” I’ve been hanging out with her for years, thought Autumn, and yet I never realized that *Julie isn’t nice*. But I have power now, I am in Night Class. I can do things I couldn’t do a day ago. And I can do some of them to Julie.

“She’d be a great Scare Choice,” said Mariah, very quietly.

“I agree,” said Andrew.

They were on Ned’s side. It had never happened before, that Ned had allies. And his new allies were not merely decorative, either. They were strong and popular and admirable.

And Julie—she might not be an ETS; but she was certainly an SC. And she would deserve it; nobody need feel guilty. In fact, it would be rather pleasurable to move in on Julie, alone in the dark.

And that means, thought Mariah, we won’t move in on Bevin, or that poor old lady.

Mariah smiled at Andrew, and he smiled back. Autumn smiled at Ned and he smiled back. They drew in close, like a pack of animals at a water hole, and they drank together.

Chapter 9

ANDREW ARRIVED AT THE HOSPITAL.

It had a vacant, abandoned look, like the minds of its patients.

There were weeds in untended gutters. There were patches of peeling paint. There were weather cracks in doors.

There were no gates, no fences, no grilles in the window. The hospital looked like a place where only the exhausted were kept; only the mental patients who had given up, and about whom nobody worried now.

Andrew swallowed. He went in by a door whose sign was so small, maybe it didn't even count. ENTRY, it said sadly.

"Where is Mr. Phillips?" asked Andrew.

"He is no longer here," said the clerk.

"Oh," said Andrew, feeling better already. "Did he go home?"

"No," said the clerk. The clerk's eyes never met Andrew's. The clerk's eyes stood still, like glass or time. "He was removed."

That made Mr. Phillips sound like a corpse, picked up by the mortuary. Andrew said nervously, "Removed by whom?"

"I couldn't say," said the clerk.

"Removed to where?" asked Andrew. I just want to get out of here, he thought. This place is creepy. What made me think of checking on Mr. Phillips, anyway? He's a grown-up, he has to take care of his own problems, I'm busy, I'm very busy, I can't get all involved with some sub's emotional welfare.

The clerk pulled a pair of red-rimmed glasses from a shirt pocket and slowly put them on. They were half glasses and his flat eyes stared out

from behind the squashed rims. The eyes never moved, and the clerk never once actually looked at, or saw, Andrew.

“And in what way,” said the clerk, “does this concern you? Are you family?”

“No,” said Andrew, “I’m one of his students.”

“You must have another Mr. Phillips in mind,” said the clerk. “This Mr. Phillips was not a teacher.”

And oh, how true that had been. Andrew said, “If you could just give me his home address ...”

“This Mr. Phillips no longer has a home,” said the clerk.

“Everybody has a home,” cried Andrew.

“What an odd idea,” said the clerk.

Mariah, the future Class Daydreamer, was daydreaming. Mariah’s dreams were so real to her that sometimes her lips moved in pretend dialogue.

Julie had never poked fun at Mariah for this. She did not know why. There was something incredibly touching about how vulnerable Mariah was when lost in her daydream, as if the slightest stray syllable could knock Mariah down.

Does anybody in this school like me from afar, the way I like Mariah? wondered Julie.

But she did not have to wonder, she knew the answer, and the answer was no.

She felt a longing in her to be nice, the way some girls might long to be beautiful, or to be thin. But being nice seemed so distant, so unlikely. And she was so good at being mean. Could she really give up all that expertise, and turn nice, which was boring?

Bevin’s new life was acceptable.

He would go to school as usual, in the car with his sister and mother, and he would get out as usual, lost in the flurry of Mariah calling hello, and dropping things, and saying things, and waving. Somehow, as usual, his mother would never notice that he, Bevin, was not welcomed the way Mariah was. And Mariah, in the way of sisters, would quickly distance herself from her loser brother.

Bevin didn't blame her. He would have loved to distance himself from such a loser. Unfortunately, he occupied the body.

Bevin would circle the school. A school on one floor, built for mild weather, it had covered porticoes all the way around, like a Roman villa. Walking purposefully, a technique he hoped would throw off pursuers, he would head for the one place where there was no covered walkway. The nifty little backing-in spot at the nurses' office door, in case an ambulance ever had to visit the school. Once it had been used for the occasional gym accident, the occasional gang fight, the occasional teacher heart failure.

Here Bevin would wait until the late bell had rung, and everybody else was in class. Then, quietly, he would walk at an angle into the trees and heavy growth that wrapped the parking lots, invisibly circling the school grounds. Then he would walk back home.

The school never called his house to ask where Bevin was, in spite of the fact that they had a full-time clerk to do this.

At first Bevin thought perhaps the clerk might call his parents at work, and that was why he had no calls to intercept at home. Then he realized that nobody had noticed his absence. No teacher had paid any attention to him when he was there, and no teacher was paying any attention to him now that he was not.

Bevin had thought there was nothing left in him to be broken, nothing left in him that still cared, but he was wrong. Not even bureaucracy cared.

Not even paperwork or computers cared.

Nobody on earth cared whether or not Bevin existed.

“Hi, Mrs. Deale!” called Andrew’s mother. “How are you today?”

“Fine, thank you,” said Mrs. Deale. She liked Andrew’s mother. She liked Andrew. She wished she could run over and embrace Mrs. Todd; pour out her loneliness; say “I’m not fine! Please ask me over for dinner! Or at least for tea!” But of course she never said any such thing, and they would all wave politely and then Mrs. Todd or Mr. Todd would drive off swiftly, in the manner of busy people with much to do.

She knew they never thought of her again.

She had decided, in her old age, that the worst and most terrible thing was never to be thought of again. At least she had had her youth, when she was beautiful, and boys adored her, and her legs were long and full of dance.

Her legs now ... they were stumps that hardly worked.

Young Andrew waited patiently for her to cross his driveway. He had a car, too, and was always going someplace. It was wonderful, really, all these people who were never lonely. She smiled at him, and he smiled back, twinkling his fingers as she hobbled on alone, thinking what a nice boy he was, and how once, many many years ago, she had been loved by nice boys like that.

Mariah studied herself in the mirror.

She had started doing this, as she recalled, in sixth grade. She wasn’t putting on makeup or fixing her hair. She was studying herself, as if she could learn who this person Mariah was by looking good and hard at that reflection.

She had learned nothing.

How extraordinary, she thought. I've occupied this body for seventeen years and I don't know who lives in it. I'm a stranger to me.

And the part of me I loved most, my secret crush, isn't inside me anymore.

Mariah, who loved bed, the cozy sweet familiar comfort of it, that squiggling-down time under the covers, where nothing but Mariah and her crush existed—Mariah could no longer stand going to bed.

There was no sweet dream of Andrew to hold in her arms like a teddy bear.

Just when she tried to snuggle down into the dreams, remember the dialogue, feel the face and kiss the lips, Night Class swarmed over her. The choice of homework. The memory of Mr. Phillips, and the film, and the future assignments.

The crush was there, she still adored Andrew, but the daydreams, the dialogues, the pretend loving and hugging—it evaporated.

Mariah was left with nothing to think about. Just a steady desperate pulsing in her skull, as if she were just anatomical now, just physiological. Not a person anymore, only a body; the delightful dialogues and histories of her imagination dried up and gone. How empty life was without it. Could she even survive without her secret lives?

As the days passed, and the second Night Class approached, Mariah felt more and more as if she had truly lost a love. As if she'd been jilted and abandoned.

Every day she would run into the real Andrew, sometimes several times a day, and she didn't know him. She tried to tell herself that real life was better, but it wasn't. In daydreams, everything worked out warm and happy, and even if she threw in some dreadful twist, some terrible event (like Andrew being in a car accident, and she, Mariah, the one to sit by his

bed and hold his hand during the coma) it always worked out beautifully, with Andrew fully recovering and deeply indebted to her for her loyalty and strength.

But in real life, he was just a busy kid with a lot of stuff to do and a lot of friends she hardly knew, and a lot of worries she knew all too well.

That last night before night school, Mariah made herself very flat on the mattress, like a paper doll. She tried to find her beloved addiction; her sweet entertainment. Andrew wasn't there.

And the moment she thought of Night Class, and the instructor, and the homework, she thought of Mr. Phillips, vanished into his own fear. It had eaten him, and he was gone.

And Bevin ... fear was eating him. He, too, was partly gone.

Bevin was being gentle with her. It terrified Mariah. Was he preparing something ... something she didn't want him to do?

Why can't I say it even inside the privacy of my head? Why be fearful of saying out loud, *I'm afraid that Bevin might—*

But even in the privacy of her head, Mariah could not express her deepest fear of what Bevin might do to himself.

It was important not to think too much about Bevin. If she kept having these thoughts that he was—well, that he—well, that—anyway, it might affect Bevin, and move him closer, and anyway, Bevin couldn't be that bad off. She was daydreaming again.

Besides, she comforted herself, I am doing things to help Bevin. I've given Night Class a different SC in his place. Julie. Julie's not innocent. Julie's cruel and deserves what she gets.

Late in the night, staring out the window at the shadows that might be more than shadows, pulling down the blinds to hide herself from whatever was out there, knowing how pointless that was, because whatever was out

there didn't care how many blinds were lowered ... Mariah thought, But Julie won't be the final assignment. How much does Bevin count? Does he count for two victims? For ten victims? When do I quit handing innocent victims over and let them have Bevin?

Autumn, too, had trouble in the evenings.

They were darker than usual, and the shadows hovered close to her face.

And yet, she was not afraid of the dark. She was afraid of the day. For it was by day that her Night Class was truly evil.

By day they looked like anybody else. They laughed and talked and dressed like anybody else. You could not tell who was who. You would guess wrong. You would trust the very ones who had chosen you as a victim.

Her own friend Julie, her longest and best friend Julie, had been named by Autumn herself as SC.

They carpooled. Ned picked up Mariah and Autumn. It was a drive full of false friendship and faked greetings. Ned had actually done a dry run, timing himself, wanting to get the drive exactly right. There must be no fumbling at driveways, no confusion at intersections.

But when Ned arrived at Autumn's house, Ned saw that she knew him to the bone. Knew his fears and flaws and failures as if she'd done a research paper on Ned. Ned waited to be cut.

But it didn't happen. Autumn grinned, slid into the front with Ned, said Ned was right on time, said it was good to see Ned.

Ned began to believe that he had a group of his own at last.

The parking lot was lit by pools of yellow which did not overlap. Ned parked carefully. He had done it, done everything right, done everything exactly as he had rehearsed, and he was part of the group.

And then he ruined it, without thinking first, without even knowing he was going to.

He got out first and saw little circles of dark, expanding and growing like cancer, taking out the circles of light. The dark chuckled, circling the four teenagers, faster and faster, like hounds going in for the kill.

“Let’s not do this,” said Ned. “Let’s just go on home. I want to drop out.”

How slurred and foreign the words felt coming out of his mouth. They were a mud slide, like the mud slide that had taken away the neighbor’s house last year. His voice didn’t sound normal at all.

Autumn was filled with shame, picking Julie, who might be rotten and nasty, but who trusted her. I must go with Ned, she thought. Ned is the one who knew the right thing, in the end.

But if I do what Ned says, I’ll be linked with him forever. Think what Julie will say next time! I just can’t have my name fastened with Ned. He may be right, but he’s such a pathetic dweeb. Ned would think I liked him and I don’t. I can’t be in public with Ned unless Andrew and Mariah are there, too; people would laugh. The worst thing, thought Autumn, is to have somebody laugh at you.

Nobody ever laughed at Autumn, but she had seen it done to others, and she played her life carefully to prevent it ever happening to her.

“We can’t drop out,” said Autumn. “The instructor said so.”

I must go with Ned, thought Mariah. To every thing there is a solution. A time to stay and a time to drop out. It’s time to drop out. But ... I’m a half loser already because of my brother. And if my secret

dreams are revealed, who cares? I don't have them anymore; they burned up, or flew away, or got sick of me. But if I drop out, they'll take Bevin. "The class is closed," she reminded Ned. "And it doesn't mean nobody else can join. It means none of us can leave."

Andrew remembered the hospital, where Mr. Phillips had not been. What if Julie ...

No. Julie was tough as steel. Julie might scream or run or something but she wasn't going to end up in a mental hospital. She was just going to have a few minutes of knowing what it was like to be picked on, instead of being the pick-owner.

Besides, if Andrew went along with what Ned said, it would be as tedious as taking on Bevin. Andrew'd be wearing those two sad-sack boys like lead weights on his shoulders. He'd never be rid of them.

People have to learn to make it on their own, Andrew told himself; you can't always be hauling them to the surface. That's called enabling.

A little psychiatric jargon always made Andrew feel better. I can't be an enabler, he reminded himself.

The night closed in, like the end of class, or the end of hope. They clung to each other, and walked on carefully, uncertain of the terrain.

Well, I did the right thing, Ned consoled himself. I suggested quitting. I can't help it if nobody actually did.

He began to look forward to tonight's work. Ned wanted to be there when Julie got hers, but at the same time, he didn't want to be.

Oh, that's nice, he thought, you're a really nice guy, Ned. It's fine with you if Julie suffers, as long as it isn't actually your fault she suffers.

Ned had forgotten how the instructor had access to his thoughts, how the silent speech penetrated like tiny bright lasers.

You are so right, Ned, said the instructor. If the SC panics, it isn't your fault. It's theirs.

How could it be *their* fault, thought Autumn, when we're doing it?

Julie, reminded the instructor, has been very, very cruel in the last several years. And not just to you. Think of her as the piranha she is, slicing open vulnerable kids, attacking the weak. It is her turn.

We won't actually hurt her, will we? said Autumn. I've spent the night at Julie's a hundred times, thought Autumn, had dinner with her a hundred times, done homework with her ... and now Julie is nothing but homework herself.

We do nothing. Of course, the effect often continues even after our departure. Last year the Scare Choices clung to each other, trying to figure out what had gone wrong in their lives, trying to find somebody to blame. They lashed out at everybody who was different. It was quite wonderful.

Were people hurt?

Oh, yes. But we didn't do it. The Scare Choices did it.

So this is never our fault?

Never. We just start things. It isn't our problem if it goes on and on, its own little ripple effect.

Even their thoughts were nothing but shadow, meaningless swirling miasma.

The closure of the class was tight around them, like nooses around the throats of the doomed.

Julie started her beloved car. There was a strange moment before the key turned the motor over, as if something were lying on the engine. She felt faintly uneasy.

Her headlights didn't penetrate the night the way they should have. She was driving in a sort of fog. A darker dark. And the dashboard no

longer lit the interior the way it usually did; the inside of the car was blacker.

She had forgotten to check the backseat before she got in. With a sickening lurch, she sensed the presence of somebody else in the car. Somebody was in there with her.

Julie whirled to look behind her, and saw nothing, but it was so dark, thick as black pillows. She reached to turn on the overhead light, but the bulb was out, and nothing happened. She even opened her car door to turn on that light but all that happened was she nearly lost control of her driving.

She actually put her hand between the two front seats to pat the leather backseat, to reassure herself that nothing was there.

Something was there.

Her hand was taken by another hand and squeezed. The hand was sweaty and thick.

Julie screamed and yanked the car to a stop, leaping out in the middle of traffic.

Cars honked, and braked, and swerved, and narrowly missed each other.

Julie stood panting on the yellow dividing lines of the pavement and stared into her own car. It was fully illuminated by the street lamps and it was empty. Completely empty.

She felt like a colossal fool. How could she have frightened herself so badly? It was not like Julie to get hysterical over zilch. She didn't even get hysterical when circumstances made hysteria reasonable.

She got back in the car, waving apologies to furious drivers on all sides, trying to smile, feeling like a jerk. Her knees were jelly and she

could hardly find the accelerator. If she had to brake, she was in trouble, her ankle wasn't going to move from one pedal to the other.

She drove slowly, but her pulse went faster and faster. Traffic vanished. Streets were empty. She turned the radio louder and louder.

None of the stations were playing; she could get nothing but static, as if broadcasting had ceased; as if some huge catastrophe had struck California and missed only Julie. When she got home, she would put the TV on a news station and see what was going on.

The drive home seemed endless and unknown. She might as well be driving in a foreign country. The road seemed to have land mines she must constantly swerve to avoid. She was gripping the wheel so tightly she got cramps in her fingers and finally took her right hand off the wheel to shake it up and down and loosen the joints.

Outside the passenger window, people were looking in at her.

Their faces were like moons, blue and shivery. No features, just skin. They were pressed right up against the glass, flattening themselves, gaping in at Julie, the zoo exhibit.

They were laughing, and pointing at her, and getting ready.

Julie slammed her brake to the floor, leaving black stripes on the pavement, and then leaving the pavement, too, ending up half in a drainage ditch.

The faces were gone.

Perhaps she had flung them off into space by stopping so fast.

If so, she had better not think about space, and what creatures filled it now.

Julie locked the doors, punching at the automatic controls, but she must have done something wrong.

The back left door opened by itself, and something got in, and shut the door after it.

Julie couldn't see it. But it was there, chuckling softly, and relaxing on her backseat.

She sat very still for a very long time.

It didn't go away, but it didn't attack, and she couldn't sit there in the ditch like an idiot; she had to drive home. She was not the sort of person to go screaming through the night to some stranger's house and ask for help because something invisible was sitting in her car.

Julie backed into the road again and drove on home, waiting for something to happen.

But of course nothing happened, and when she entered her own driveway, she was sweating with fear, but mostly she was angry with herself and ashamed.

Boy, am I easy to scare, she thought.

The words seemed to hang in the night air, as if other people had heard them, and liked them, and planned to use them later.

Easy To Scare.

Her parents were not yet home, although it was after eleven. It was their bridge night. They were card fiends, and played very seriously. "Playing" was incorrect; the way her parents did bridge, it was work. Maybe even war.

Julie's property was dotted with signs that said DO NOT TRESPASS: ARMED RESPONSE. Each window had a little sticker: WIRED FOR ARMED RESPONSE. ATTACK DOG signs began and ended the driveway.

Although there was no dog, there was a sophisticated alarm system, and Julie went in quickly, slamming the door behind her, and punching in the code that reset the alarms.

It did not matter how quickly she shut the door, however.
Night Class did not concern itself with doors.

Chapter 10

THE DARK LIVED.

It breathed, and Julie could hear it.

Julie held her breath. Around her, breathing went on.

There was somebody, or something, locked in the house with her.

She wanted to hold her breath for a long time; it was like holding onto her life. But it was impossible. Her lungs acquired a life of their own, dragging in air with great sucking wheezes, giving away her position. Giving away, thought Julie, the best place to stab me.

So this was shortness of breath! This shrieking of lungs: Panic equals oxygen failure.

Get out of the house, Julie told herself. Unlock the door. Run for it.

A home is a sanctuary; a home is a safety zone. But not this one. The squashed faces of the demons outside her car ... were they inside here with her?

She could not move. Like the fawn hoping to escape the wolf's notice, Julie froze. She could not walk, could not lift her arms, could not call out.

The room was full; the house was full; the furniture was full.

Of what?

Julie's poise washed away as if it had been nothing but temporary dye, and now her true colors were going to show. The color of fear.

Every hair on her skin stretched upward, tentacles on a sea anemone searching strange waters.

And the waters around her were very, very strange.

Julie whirled, grabbing for the doorknob, thinking, I'll drive away, I'll—

—and once more, another set of fingers were there waiting for her. She touched skin, not metal. She touched a hand, not a knob. The same fat, damp palm closed on her own.

“No!” screamed Julie, jerking her hand back. She scrunched up on herself, getting thinner, taking up less space, thinking *don't notice me, don't touch me, don't come after me*, and from the other side of the room came a soft chuckle.

It was the softness that horrified her. A possessive sound, as if Julie belonged to that chuckle. No matter what Julie did now, no matter where she ran or how she screamed, the chuckle would be there first.

Julie tucked her hands up under her own arms, to protect them from being held and fondled by that horrible, invisible, sweating palm. But to protect her back, her neck, her face?

“Go away,” she whispered. She meant to scream, but there wasn't enough air. Where had the air gone? She was going to suffocate.

She reached for the lights. Better the devil you can see than the devil you can't. But the fingers, of course, lay sprawled across the switches. Julie slammed her fist down against those fingers, flicking the switches anyhow.

The architect who had designed their house had been in love with lights: frosty round bulbs were sunk into the ceiling, dimmer switches and chandeliers, half-moons here, full globes there; light, light, light.

And light of course, as light always does, disproved her fears.

The house contained only Julie.

There was no hand on any knob, no fingers lying across any switches. There was only Julie, panting and sweating as if she had showered in fear.

Julie dragged oxygen into starved lungs, panting like an old dog. She blushed at the thought that somebody might have caught her! Julie—calm, poised, tough, sophisticated Julie!—behaving like an hysterical idiot over nothing. This was like draping your own jacket over a chair and ten minutes later, being scared by the profile of an intruder who was nothing more than your own jacket.

Good grief, thought Julie. “I’ll just sit in the Jacuzzi for a while,” she said out loud, comforted by the sound of her voice. She popped a CD into the main music system and flicked the indoor control for the outdoor whirlpool. The water was wonderfully hot and the family enjoyed the Jacuzzi most of the year. It sat on the outermost edge of a huge expanse of redwood deck cantilevered out over the steep hillside. Pots of flowers bloomed year-round at its edges.

From inside, Julie watched the water bubble and churn.

Now she had too much air, and blew it out in a long calming spout like a surfacing whale, and actually managed to smile at herself. She shook her head ruefully.

Then she headed for the stairs: long wide slabs of oak between the thin white wire sides. She would get her favorite towel, a thick, thick terry blanket of snow-white, and she would—

At the top of the stairs, her little night-lights glowed. But the hall light, which had been Cinderella that morning, was no longer a flowing ball gown. It had become a chalky rectangle, with a thin leering crescent moon. Its edges were sharp as razor blades.

On the outside of the glass deck doors came the distinctive sound of fingernails scraping.

Julie tried to turn slowly, tried to take her time, tried to think rationally, tried to bottle her terror back up, cork it.

The Jacuzzi burbled, like a friendly creek.

Shadows encircled the whirlpool, lost interest, and drifted over the empty deck: the shadows of people ... but there were no people. The shadows seemed to wave at her. Then they advanced on her, like people she had once known.

Julie's scalp prickled and her eyes filled with tears. The doors are locked, she said to herself, they're weather-stripped and solid and in perfect condition and nothing, not a draft, not the thinnest sheet of paper, could come through the cracks.

The shadows sifted right through. She heard them chuckling as they bypassed the locks.

The lights went off. All of them. Together. A power failure of the house, while Julie herself had a power failure of the heart.

No, no, no, no, not me, I'm not brave enough for this, don't pick on me, please don't pick on me!

She had a queer little flashback of all the times she had picked on others, surrounding them with her sharp, vicious remarks and her taunting, haunting laughter.

The shadows wrapped themselves around her body and tangled themselves in her ankles.

Julie's scream was a solid thing, a great cancerous ball in her throat, rolling out to fill the room with its terror. The scream had left her throat and reached her mouth—and the phone rang. It rang only once and Julie snatched it up by instinct. Nothing else would have functioned for Julie at that moment.

It was the last person on earth she would have expected to call her number, and yet what that person had to say did not surprise Julie at all.

“Fascinating,” said the instructor. “Julie certainly did not turn out to be an ETS, did she?”

They were back in the library, complete with flesh and bone and clothing and hair, staring at each other.

“That’s what is so enjoyable about this,” said the instructor. “You cannot predict. I was getting a little bored, because Julie was caving in so predictably. A shiver here, a shudder there, followed by a scream, probably the effort to run. It can be so repetitive. Of course, enticing her out on the deck into her whirlpool would have added interest, but the fact is, we lost her.”

He was not in the least sad about losing Julie. He was elated.

Autumn felt a deeper fear than any fear yet. “What are you going to do next?” she whispered. “I don’t want you to do anything next. Julie turned out to be too strong. Let’s just leave her alone. She wasn’t an ETS and that’s that.”

The instructor’s head wobbled a little, not shaking no or nodding yes. Perhaps the instructor was not even there; was a fading hologram; and this would all go away and could be forgotten.

“She wasn’t an Easy To Scare,” said the instructor, “which was, of course, your assignment. You have failed in your assignment. However, Julie is an excellent find. As a Scare Choice, I have none better at the moment. I have advanced classes, of course, and I will assign Julie to them.”

“No!” cried Autumn. “That isn’t fair.”

“Fair?” repeated the instructor. “How extraordinary,” said the instructor, “that you ever thought anything here would be fair.”

He was deeply amused. His laughter welled up from some black and bottomless hole in their lives and expanded to fill their eardrums and

skulls and souls.

The instructor shook his head. “Andrew, the film.”

The film was dull, because Julie hadn’t reacted as visibly and quickly as Mr. Phillips. And yet Julie turned out to be very photogenic, her lovely willful face alternating fear and ordinary embarrassment, deep panic and quick relaxation, hideous knowledge and mere puzzlement.

The house itself was photogenic, with its sharp angles and gaudy lighting and wonderful deck riding the sky out toward the Pacific Ocean. The opening soundtrack was quite wonderful: love songs on the CD and bubbling water from the Jacuzzi. It was the kind of film opening where you knew something terrible was going to happen ... *but what?*

Nothing terrible had happened, though. The phone had rung, Julie listened, asked a few sharp meaningless questions, slammed the phone down, grabbed her car keys, stomped out the front door, and drove away.

Even the instructor had not been a problem for Julie at that moment. Julie walked through him as if he were nothing.

But he *was* nothing, thought Autumn. How did Julie know, all of a sudden, that our threat was nothing? She wasn’t being brave, in the last moment; she lost interest. She had better things to do. What were they?

Autumn, who thought she knew Julie, had no answers. Who could have called Julie right then, except herself, or Brooke, or Danielle? Yet she knew from Julie’s face that it hadn’t been one of the group. What brief conversation could have ended terror and so swiftly replaced it with an errand greater than fear?

Autumn could no longer remember why Julia was chosen as an SC. It was disgusting. It was wrong. Julie was her good, good friend. It didn’t matter that Julie could be bossy and demanding and arrogant. They were friends. How could Autumn have turned on her?

“I’ll keep the film,” said the instructor to Andrew. “My advanced classes will get the next episode. You’ll view what happens to Julie at the party. Andrew, I must admit, you are a better producer than I. Your film is award-winning. Mine is merely documentary.”

I wanted a life of love and sunshine, thought Mariah. I wanted a life of real sweet.

Andrew on a date, and real popular Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle for friends. How did I get this far away from them? I thought I was going in the right direction.

“You are going in the right direction,” said the instructor, his smile so sharp it practically gave Mariah paper cuts. “My direction,” he said. “Evil.”

Autumn laughed out loud. “You always wonder,” she explained to the others, “that if you are faced with evil, will you do the right thing? Will you be the hero? Will you save the baby from the burning building? Will you stop the bad guys? Well, now we know. We join the evil. We are the evil.”

“No, we’re not!” said Andrew. “No, we are not,” he said again, to reassure himself. “It isn’t our fault that anything is happening. Besides, nothing is happening. Julie is safe, she got away.”

The instructor’s smile went farther than the edges of his face: Its cutting edge moved out into the room, like a moonlit scimitar. Julie got away *this* time, his smile said.

Who will I be friends with now? Thought Autumn, in anguish. I can never face Julie. Bad enough that I handed her over to my own Night Class, but now she’s going to be assigned to stronger more vicious Night Classes, until they catch her and finish her off. How can I be part of Julie-

Brooke-Danielle ever again? How can I possibly rejoin the old ways and the old places?

“You can’t, of course,” said the instructor. “Once you’ve joined the class, it closes behind you, and there is no way to drop out. There’s no point in pretending otherwise. The only way to go is forward.”

Forward toward what? thought Mariah. She had lost the mainstay of her life: her daydreams. She had nothing with which to fill the space, not even Andrew. “Well, I don’t care,” she said, because she didn’t, “I’m dropping out. We should never have scared somebody once, never mind twice. I quit.”

“There is no dropping out,” the instructor repeated.

“Yeah?” said Mariah, pressing her flat hands against her thighs. “And what are you going to do about it?”

His laugh rang like a peal of bells in a distant tower. His laugh clanged in their ears: a huge bronze metallic laugh. “Mariah, Mariah,” he said, tolling his bell, “I will assign Bevin, of course.”

“You can’t do that,” whispered Mariah.

“Mariah, Mariah, remember how many classes I have, and how many beginners need an ETS like Bevin.” The instructor’s laugh grew smaller and smaller, till it had become round and friendly and chuckly. “Don’t forget your homework,” his voice said. His body, if he had ever had one, was gone. The form and shape of him was gone. Only his voice and his power were left. “Supply me with an ETS next week, or I will choose my own.”

They were alone, in a classroom whose walls were decorated with the usual paper debris of school: posters, charts, maps, graphs, order forms, photos.

Ned thought of elderly people, alone and afraid. Of the anxious first to arrive at night meetings in empty buildings, pretending to be sure of the dark. Of little kids whose parents got home after dark, little kids alone in the house with the television and the snacks ... and Night Class sifting through the walls.

Andrew tried to wet his lips enough to make speech possible. The effort exhausted him. “There’s an old lady who lives near us. We can use her. Nobody cares about her.”

Chapter 11

“LET ME IN!” SHOUTED Julie. She shook the knob vigorously, and kicked the door.

Nothing happened.

She had been here before. Years ago, in elementary school, before the group had solidified, and Julie-Brooke-Autumn-Danielle ceased to go anywhere but each other’s houses, she remembered a birthday party here, and an egg hunt in the backyard, getting seconds of cake in the kitchen.

The night was very dark. She had no idea where steps or slopes or roots might be, and yet she ran, fearless of falling, thinking only of wrenching a door open.

It was fear of what might have happened since the phone call that filled her. She felt herself getting solid, as if she were a plaster copy of herself.

She thought of a hundred things she should have done: called the police, called the ambulance, called the parents ...

The kitchen door was unlocked. Julie raced inside, yelling, “Bevin! Where are you? Bevin!”

He was right in front of her, surrounded by an array of kitchen utensils, including knives.

But he was unhurt.

Julie flung herself on him, hugging and holding, squeezing him tight enough to bruise ribs, his and hers, and he said in astonishment, “*You* came.”

“Of course I came.”

“But you were a wrong number,” said Bevin.

Julie kept holding, not sure whether she was holding Bevin for Bevin's sake or for hers. If she hung on tightly, she could keep him from danger. He could not hurt himself. Finally she let go of his shoulders and instead grabbed his wrists, feeling the pulses, surprised as always that pulses were off on the sides, instead of the middle where you'd expect a pulse to be. His heart was pumping steadily. The blessed normalcy of health.

"Would you really have done anything, Bevin?" She thought: I can't use the word, even though I'm here and that's why I came and that's why I had to drive so fast. Then she thought: I have to use the word. I have to admit it. We're all going to have to admit it. She said, "Would you have committed suicide, Bevin?"

"I don't know." His eyes were very blurry and she thought that it was not with tears, but confusion. Confusion deeper and more extensive than anything Julie had ever felt. In her entire life she had certainly never thought of ending her life. How big did despair have to get for a boy to reach the point of just not wanting to be there?

She found herself feeling incredibly attached to Bevin, incredibly emotional toward him, for he had chosen her to save him.

"I was looking for Mariah," said Bevin. "I don't know why I thought she would be at your house." Bevin sagged and his wrists seemed to grow thinner in her tight grip. "Mariah's always wanted to be friends with the four of you," said Bevin. "I guess somehow I thought she pulled it off. I don't know why. I feel as if she's been around you lately. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"You didn't bother me," said Julie. Her eyes were so full of tears that their blurriness matched. "You honored me," she said. "I'm not a very nice

person. I don't think anybody else would have thought of me to be the rescuer."

Julie knew that Bevin had not thought of her to rescue him. He had been thinking of his sister. And yet she felt it was no wrong number; it had been meant; she had been meant to pick up that phone and come here. She was meant to do something good for a change.

She looked around the unfamiliar kitchen. She needed to do something comforting, but what? Her mother was a big fan of soup: Chicken noodle was the comfort food in their house. Julie could not imagine herself opening a can of chicken noodle, heating it up and the two of them trying to spoon that down.

She said, "We need to be out in the world where it's normal."

"I don't want to be out in the world," said Bevin. "Normal is horrible. That's the trouble, Julie. I'm afraid of normal. Other people are so mean."

"They outgrow it," said Julie, and knew that she had outgrown it. Being mean in order to entertain herself had slipped away like a snakeskin. I was a snake, she thought. I hope I've metamorphosed into something better. What kind of person would Julie be if Julie were nice?

To every thing there is a time. Time to be nice.

"We'll go get pizza," she said. "Come on. We'll have hot food, there'll be music, we'll dance, we'll laugh, and I'll bring you home when your family's back."

"You don't want to dance with me," said Bevin, actually managing a real expression on his face.

"I've actually never had a date," said Julie. "I'm too mean. Boys walk away from me."

"They'll really walk away from you if you associate with me," said Bevin. There was no bitterness in his voice. No anger. Just acceptance. He

was such a loser that to be with him was to be a loser.

Julie had helped put Bevin there. She had picked on losers big time. She had prided herself on the creation and feeding of losers. “Bevin, please. Please do this for me. I have to start over tonight. I feel as if I went to class tonight, or something. Had some huge lesson.”

“I’m not your homework,” said Bevin.

“Good. You sound angry,” said Julie. “I think that’s better. I think when suicides start talking mad, they’re feeling better.”

“I’m not a suicide.”

“Good. Let’s go have pizza. I’m starving. I need company. You wouldn’t believe what a night I’ve had.”

“I didn’t have a great night, either,” said Bevin, quite annoyed that Julie was claiming a worse night than he’d had. How weird it felt to sit in Julie’s car. Like somebody in a different building on a different day in a different body.

He could not imagine how he had made a connection with Julie, of all people. He was foggy about that phone call. His desperation had been so great he’d had to talk with somebody, and somehow he’d thought that on the telephone, Mariah would listen, would even hear him, would see him, as opposed to real life where Mariah seemed to live in some other world.

I suppose we all live in some other world, thought Bevin.

Remembering the real world, he said, in some embarrassment, “Julie, I don’t have any money.”

“My treat.”

They looked at each other, the hard beauty of Julie and the whipped exhaustion of Bevin, and knew that it *was* a treat. A gift from somewhere else. Julie’s treat to be asked to help, and Bevin’s to have been helped.

Where did it come from? thought Julie. The phone call. The timing. The memory of Bevin's kitchen door. It's as if something good was sort of hanging there, like a guardian angel, ready to jump in and tell me what to do. "What kind of pizza do you like?" said Julie.

"Not white pizza," said Bevin. "You might as well have toasted cheese sandwiches. I want mine dripping with tomato sauce and olive oil."

The evening wore on for Andrew, Autumn, Ned, and Mariah: more Coke, more pizza, more high-pitched chatter, because nobody wanted to go back out into the dark night and see who they were.

Night Class had been very brief. It took little time to terrorize somebody. Or fail at it, as they had with Julie.

Autumn felt as if her friendships, so rock solid, had turned to water. She herself had poured them out on the ground, and they had disappeared into dry cracks and were gone forever. Whatever else Julie-Brooke-Danielle had been, they had been friends. And Autumn had turned on the friendship, offered it up, used it.

Mariah felt like an old stone building in ruins. She was pillars and columns lying broken on the grass. She who had wanted a life of sunshine, who had never thought much about the dark, was now partly living there. I am *in* the dark, thought Mariah, and I *am* the dark, *and I bring the dark*. "Andrew, we can't pick on some old lady. We can't do it. Especially if nobody cares about her. Somebody has to care about her. It'll have to be us."

"What else can we do? What about Bevin?"

"I'll have to stay with Bevin somehow," said Mariah. "Protect him."

"Maybe we could protect Bevin in shifts," said Ned. "The four of us could take turns."

Andrew's sitting here wishing that this wasn't happening, thought Mariah, but Ned's willing to work on a way out. Does Andrew, the real Andrew, measure up to my secret crush Andrew? Does the real Andrew even matter? What matters here is the next ETS. Suppose we do manage to protect Bevin somehow. What about this old lady of Andrew's? How do you stop a Night Class?

Classes can't be stopped. You can't pass the threshold of night school unless the instructor lets you. They can't be exposed; they are only shadows. They can't be arrested; they're only sound. It's like prejudice. Hard to destroy.

Autumn said, "Mariah. Your brother's here."

Mariah said, "Autumn. He's with Julie." It was Ned who raised his hand, and waved, and yelled, "Over here! Here we are!"

Andrew thought the weirdest thing was that Julie should be glad to see them. When he was shadow and sound, Julie had almost known Andrew. Julie had almost recognized the four of them, shadows on her deck. But here was Julie laughing with relief and delight, pulling Bevin along like her own kid brother, jamming herself and Bevin into the booth. Here was Julie, as always taking complete charge whether anybody asked her to or not, making Autumn sit with Mariah and Andrew, and squeezing herself and Bevin into the booth with Ned on the other side.

Andrew almost wanted to confess. It was me, he wanted to say, I was the one who scared you.

But Julie did not appear in the least scared of anything. "You guys look rattled," she said. "What happened? Did you have some close-call car accident? Is everybody okay?"

Mariah said, "Bevin? What—um—what—?"

"You wouldn't believe," said Julie.

Bevin put his hand on Julie's. "Julie. No. Okay?"

"No what?" said Julie.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"This is your sister," said Julie. "She was the one you meant to call."

Julie leaned across the table, elbowing up into a confiding position that the rest immediately copied, so their arms made a tent for their chins, and they could talk close and quietly. "Bevin telephoned my house looking for you, Mariah. It was so strange. I mean, that he should have thought of *my* phone number to reach *you*. You've never even been to my house, Mariah. But it was great good luck. Because I was able to get over to your house in time."

"In time for what?" said Mariah.

"You have to tell, Bevin," said Julie. "If you don't, I will."

"It's not their business." Bevin was ready to escape, but Julie had wedged him in too tightly against Ned.

"It sure is Mariah's business," said Julie. "Mariah, did you know that your brother isn't even attending school? He's so depressed and people pick on him so much that he just gets out of the car with you and waves good-bye to your mother and then he goes home and goes back to bed for the whole day."

Mariah forgot Night Class. She forgot the instructor and the homework and the entire world except her brother. "Oh, Bevin," she whispered, "I knew it was bad, but I pretended it wasn't that bad." She took his hands across the table. I pretend too much, she thought. I'm giving it up. Daydreams have their place, but not that much of a place. No more secret lives. I have to live where my brother lives, and see him and listen to him.

It was Julie who had seen and listened, who had run fast enough to save.

Julie, whom Mariah and Ned and Autumn and Andrew had specifically chosen and marked out and stalked.

Julie drove Bevin and Mariah home so they could tell their parents. “We can’t tell Mom and Dad,” said Bevin, horrified. “Dad will be furious. He doesn’t want me to be this kind of person.”

“I’ll bet he wants you alive, though,” said Julie quietly. “I’ll bet he’d rather have you rescued than lose you.”

Andrew, Autumn, and Ned stared at the crusts of their pizza, and the single remaining cold, congealed wedge. Ice melted in their glasses and used napkins bled tomato sauce.

“The instructor was right,” said Autumn. “It’s always a surprise. You don’t know who is brave. You can’t tell until you get there. Julie is brave all the way through.”

“I don’t think Night Class can hurt any of them now,” said Ned. “Because they’re strong, and I think you have to choose the weak. Julie and Mariah and even Bevin now, they aren’t weak. The way Tommy and Sal aren’t weak, either.”

“That’s why we signed up for Night Class,” said Autumn, suddenly understanding. “We’re weak.”

Ned had always known that he was weak. He would not have categorized Andrew that way, ever. Nor Autumn. Ever.

“I can’t stand to think of myself that way,” said Andrew. “I am not weak. I’m the class leader. The Most Likely To Succeed.”

“Do you think if we just don’t show up at Night School that it will be over with?” said Autumn. “Even though the instructor said you can’t drop out, Mariah just dropped out. For good.”

“That’s it, you know,” said Ned. “For good. That’s the key. You have to do things for good.” He swirled ice shards at the bottom of his soda glass. “We do have to drop out, but we have to tell the instructor. We have to give our reasons.”

“Reasons,” said the instructor, “do not matter.”

The instructor was sitting next to Ned.

The instructor had simply materialized, out of nowhere, and he was less clear than he had ever been: a darkness, a wraith, a smell of sewage. People in booths around them got uncomfortable and looked away, and left early.

“You are members of my Class and you will stay members of my Class.”

“But what are you?” whispered Autumn.

“I’m Evil. I come in any form that works, of course. Vampires and street gangs—we’re all the same. You are fond of school, so I came as an instructor.”

“Go away.”

“You can’t get rid of me. You can stop seeing me if you like, or stop doing your homework, but you can’t get rid of me.”

The smile was triumphant. It hung as the moon hangs in the sky, a sharp-tipped curl in the dark.

Andrew the watcher, Mariah the dreamer, Ned the loser, thought Autumn. And what am I? Am I an obedient follower? Will I just say, Guess I’d better do my homework on time then.

Autumn thought of Bevin, whose dark had been so much darker than they had known; whose dark had needed no Night Class to shatter it; for whom the lack of friends had been dark enough.

She thought of herself, who had turned on a lifelong friend so swiftly, so easily, telling herself the friend deserved it.

She thought of Andrew's elderly neighbor, some poor old woman struggling to get through each day—and how Night School would see to it that one night, the old woman didn't make it.

"No," said Autumn flatly. "We won't do it anymore. We're dropping out. So get lost."

"You cannot lose me," said the instructor. "You made a choice." Choice.

"Oh!" cried Autumn. "I understand now. The Scare Choice. It isn't the victim you were talking about. That isn't the choice! The choice is us! We chose to do it."

Ned sucked in his breath, understanding her. "You get a choice," whispered Ned. "Pick on people or don't pick on people. Be kind or be cruel. Watch it happen or stop it from happening. You have a choice."

"We made the Scare Choice," said Autumn, "and we were wrong. We are dropping out. For *good*."

"And don't even think about touching Andrew's old lady neighbor," said Ned. "Because somebody cares about her now. We care about her now."

The chuckle returned, soft and waiting, from the throat of one who has evil plans.

"Here are the films, Andrew," said the instructor. "They are yours. So many choices, Andrew. You may keep them. Show them. Or destroy them." The instructor smiled. "The films are brilliant, Andrew. You know they are. Do come to the party. I will send you an invitation."

The shadow of him lessened, and thinned. For a moment there was smoke where the instructor had been and then there was nothing.

Nothing visible, anyway, thought Autumn.

There were only wrinkled napkins, empty Coke glasses, and cold pizza. No sense of evil lingered. Even knowledge and memory of evil began to fade.

I should write it down, thought Autumn, or hang onto a thread of it, because you cannot allow yourself to forget how easily it can touch you.

“Is he really gone?” whispered Ned. “Or just waiting? It can’t be this easy.”

“I think he’s always waiting,” said Autumn.

They trembled in the hot music-laden dining room.

“Waiting for what?” Andrew wanted to know.

“Choice,” said Autumn, who for one tiny sliver of time knew all the answers. “Waiting for when you have to make another choice, waiting to help you make the choice, waiting to step up and turn from smoke to flesh.”

Ned shuddered. Autumn in her cloak of knowledge was as terrifying as the instructor had been in his Cloak of evil. “What’s your neighbor’s name, Andrew?” said Ned. He spoke loudly and brazenly, shoving away smoke. “I’ll drop by and pretend to sell grapefruit for the marching band, or something, get to know her, make sure she’s okay.”

But Andrew did not tell him what he wanted to know. A funny hot greedy expression crossed Andrew’s handsome face. “Look outside,” said Andrew.

In the almost-empty parking lot, shadows gathered like a mob. Shadows drawing together to make themselves thick and strong, moving on, finding another SC.

Autumn leaped out of the booth and raced out of the restaurant and ran out into the parking lot, waving her arms like a person running through

a flock of ducks on the grass, to make them fly away.

From inside she looked truly peculiar, a girl gone nuts, trying to scatter gravel.

But the shadows were gone.

Andrew was embarrassed for her. He hated it when people did stupid things in public.

“I guess you always look foolish when you’re trying to stop something nobody else sees,” said Ned. I’m in love with Autumn, he thought. She won’t ever love me back, but I can drive her home anyway. We can check on Andrew’s neighbor together.

Autumn and Ned drove away.

Andrew walked alone to his own vehicle. How tightly he gripped his films. He remembered how the principal had been so surprised that Andrew would bother to check on Mr. Phillips. He remembered that he had not, in the end, bothered anymore with Mr. Phillips. Nor cared anymore.

We all had darkness in us, thought Andrew Todd. All four of us stepped up when darkness appeared, and I, some of the time, even enjoyed the dark. Did Mariah enjoy it? Did Ned? Did Autumn?

Very lightly, he swung the camcorder back and forth. Just as lightly, his thoughts went back and forth. Which should he do? Which would make the better film? Light? Or dark?

Autumn had been right. There would always, always be a moment of choice: choice between kindness or cruelty ... between entertaining one’s self or sparing others.

For a moment Andrew was very angry. You should be able to make one single choice and be done with it, not have this constant nagging at the bottom of your soul. Andrew looked down at the bottom of his soul. How

great was the appeal of the darkness. How quickly the smoke of evil swirled up when you thought *choice*.

Andrew lifted the camcorder, and hugged it to his heart. The thought of future films and parties warmed him. He tried to run to his car. Shadows deepened around him. Catch up to the others, thought Andrew dimly. Get with Autumn and Ned, find Mariah and Julie and Bevin.

Stumble, whispered the instructor, *and join the dark*.

Andrew stumbled.

A Biography of Caroline B. Cooney

Caroline B. Cooney is the author of ninety books for teen readers, including the bestselling thriller *The Face on the Milk Carton*. Her books have won awards and nominations for more than one hundred state reading prizes. They are also on recommended-reading lists from the American Library Association, the New York Public Library, and more. Cooney is best known for her distinctive suspense novels and romances.

Born in 1947, in Geneva, New York, Cooney grew up in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, where she was a library page at the Perrot Memorial Library and became a church organist before she could drive. Music and books have remained staples in her life.

Cooney has attended lots of colleges, picking up classes wherever she lives. Several years ago, she went to college to relearn her high school Latin and begin ancient Greek, and went to a total of four universities for those subjects alone!

Her sixth-grade teacher was a huge influence. Mr. Albert taught short story writing, and after his class, Cooney never stopped writing short stories. By the time she was twenty-five, she had written eight novels and countless short stories, none of which were ever published. Her ninth book, *Safe as the Grave*, a mystery for middle readers, became her first published book in 1979. Her real success began when her agent, Marilyn Marlow, introduced her to editors Ann Reit and Beverly Horowitz.

Cooney's books often depict realistic family issues, even in the midst of dramatic adventures and plot twists. Her fondness for her characters comes through in her prose: "I love writing and do not know why it is considered such a difficult, agonizing profession. I love all of it, thinking

up the plots, getting to know the kids in the story, their parents, backyards, pizza toppings.” Her fast-paced, plot-driven works explore themes of good and evil, love and hatred, right and wrong, and moral ambiguity.

Among her earliest published work is the Fog, Snow, and Fire trilogy (1989–1992), a series of young adult psychological thrillers set in a boarding school run by an evil, manipulative headmaster. In 1990, Cooney published the award-winning *The Face on the Milk Carton*, about a girl named Janie who recognizes herself as the missing child on the back of a milk carton. The series continued in *Whatever Happened to Janie?* (1993), *The Voice on the Radio* (1996), and *What Janie Found* (2000). The first two books in the Janie series were adapted for television in 1995. A fifth book, *Janie Face to Face*, will be released in 2013.

Cooney has three children and four grandchildren. She lives in South Carolina, and is currently researching a book about the children on the *Mayflower*.



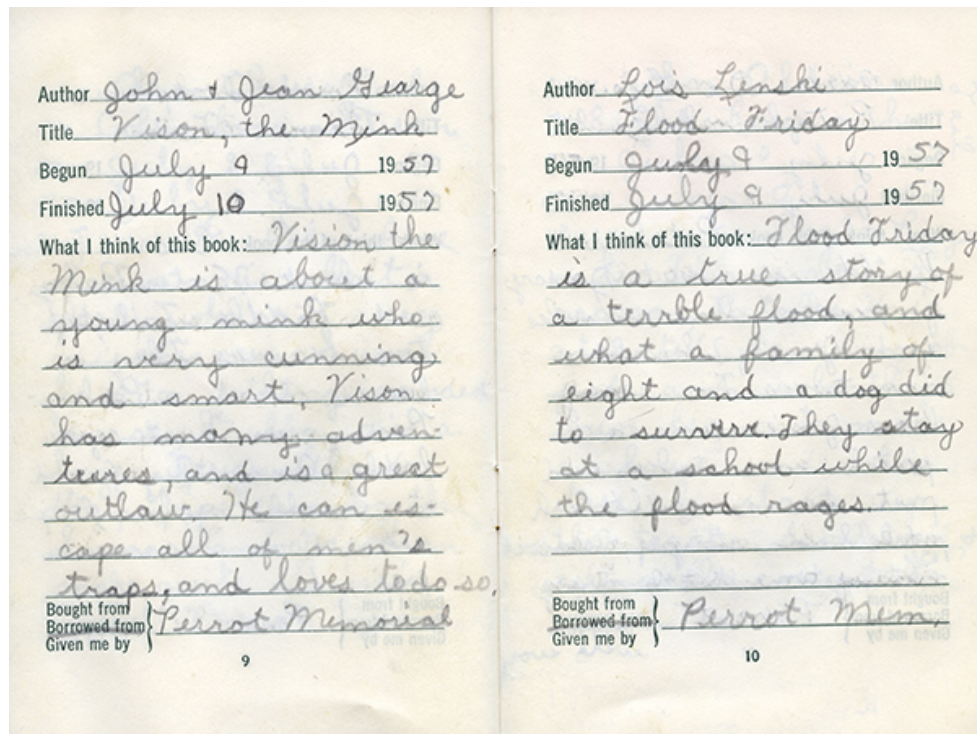
The house in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, where Cooney grew up. She recalls: “In the 1950s, we walked home from school, changed into our play clothes, and went outside to get our required fresh air. We played yard games, like Spud, Ghost, Cops and Robbers, and Hide and Seek. We ranged far afield and no parent supervised us or even asked where we were going. We led our own lives, whether we were exploring the woods behind our houses, wading in the creek at low tide, or roller skating in somebody’s cellar, going around and around the furnace!”



Cooney at age three.



Cooney, age ten, reading in bed—one of her favorite activities then and now.



Ten-year-old Cooney won a local library's summer reading contest in 1957 by compiling book reviews. In her collection, she wrote reviews of Lois Lenski's *Indian Captive: The Story of Mary Jemison* and Jean Craighead George's *Vision, the Mink*.

"What a treat when I met Jean George at a convention," she recalls.

COMMENTS OF TEACHERS
 (Date and initial all comments)

Kitty is doing very well. However, I might make one helpful comment: Because Kitty enjoys creative writing, her stories tend to be long. As a result only first drafts are finished. Budgeting her time more satisfactorily would be beneficial. B.A. jr. 1-21-59

Kitty's academic growth has been marvelous. However, she has become a little lax in a few habits and attitudes. B.A. jr. 4-27-59

	I	II	III	IV
Times tardy (Reported as of the end of the preceding month.)	0	0	0	1
Days absent	1	3.5	5.5	0
Conference desired by teacher				
Conference desired by parents				

Please sign and return

SIGNATURE OF PARENT

1. Martha W. Bruce
 2. Martha W. Bruce
 3. Reula M. Bruce

This is to certify that Caroline Bruce
 has been assigned to grade 7 beginning September, 19 59.

Burton Albert, Jr.
Teacher

Cooney's report card from sixth grade in 1959. "Mr. Albert and I are still friends over fifty years later," she says.



Cooney in middle school: "I went through some lumpy stages!"



In 1964, Cooney received the Flora Mai Holly Memorial Award for Excellence in the Study of American Literature from the National League of American Pen Women. “I always meant to write to them, and tell them that I kept going!” Cooney says. “I love the phrase ‘pen woman.’ I’m proud to be one.”



Cooney at age nineteen, just after graduating from high school. (Photo courtesy of Warren Kay Vantine Studio of Boston.)



Cooney with Ann Reit, her book editor at Scholastic. Many of the books Cooney wrote with Reit were by assignment. “Ann decided what books she wanted (for example, ‘entry-level horror, no bloodshed, three-book series,’ which became *Fog*, *Snow*, and *Fire*) and I wrote them. I loved writing by assignment; it was such a challenge and delight to create a book when I had never given the subject a single thought.”



Cooney with her late agent Marilyn Marlow, who worked with her on all of the titles that are now available as ebooks from Open Road.

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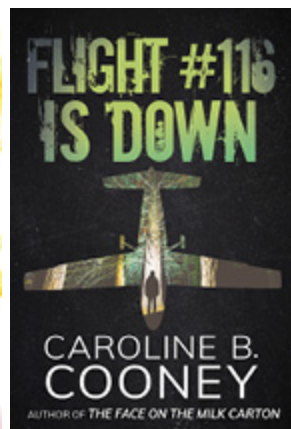
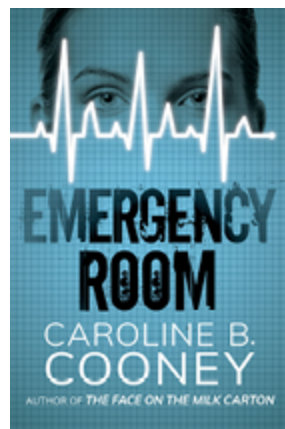
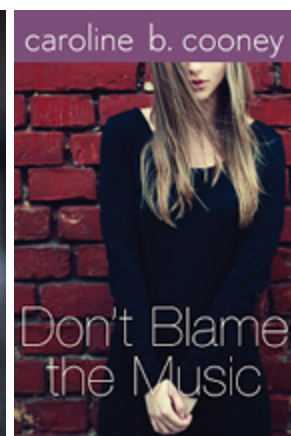
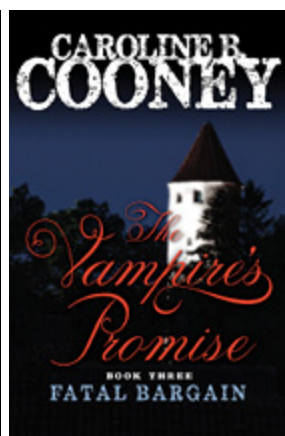
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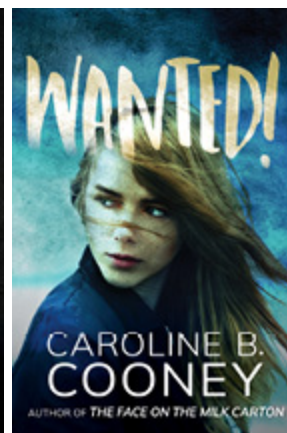
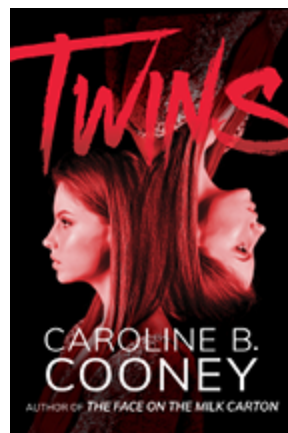
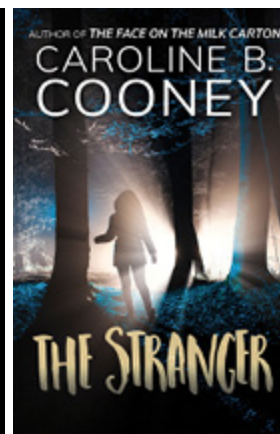
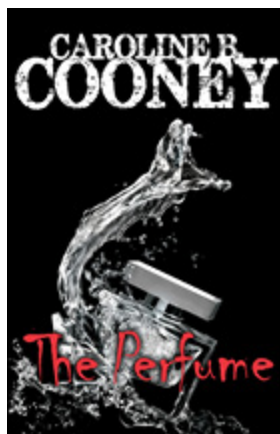
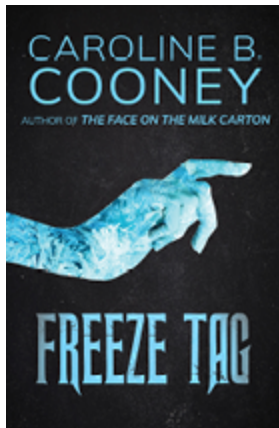


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